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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

BORROWED HOSSES

By STEPHEN PAYNE

The Devil's RANGE

A Complete Book-Length Novel of the Wild West's Most Famous Riders of the Owl-Hoot Trail

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

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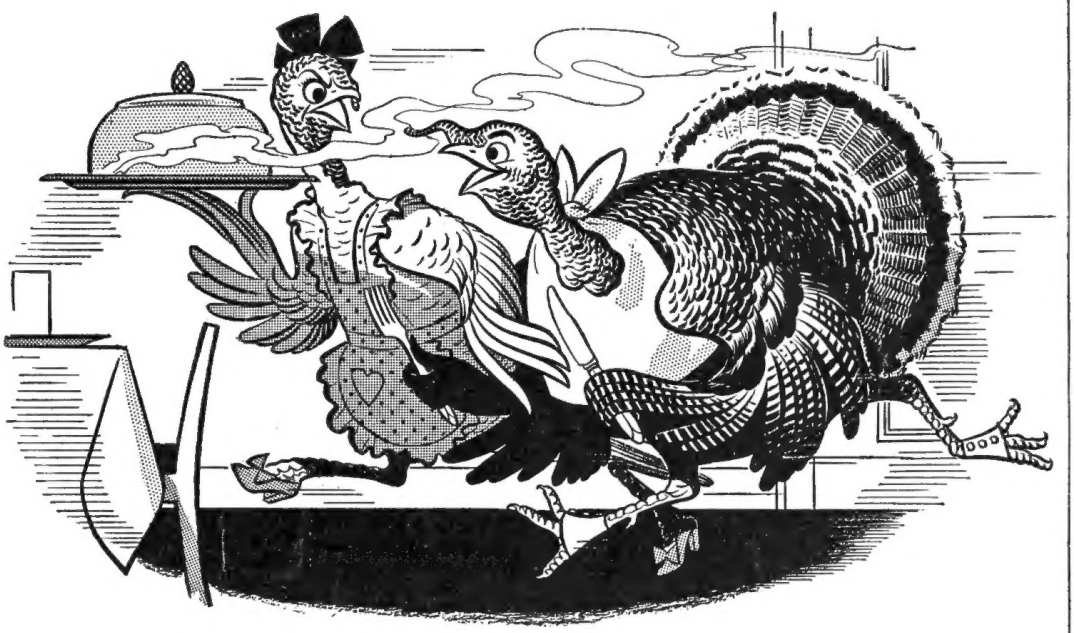

Food is the mightiest weapon of all. This holiday season, buy and cook only what you need. Eat it all. Waste nothing. Share with those who need it most. Food Fights for Freedom.

"Be wise!... Clear heads choose Calvert"

Sponsored by the makers of

Calvert

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Calvert Distillers Corporation, New York City. BLENDED WHISKEY Calvert "Reserve": 86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits Calvert "Special": 86.8 Proof—60% Grain Neutral Spirits.

New Sickness and Accident Plan Pays $25 Weekly Benefits

Costs Only $12 a Year—Down Payment $2.50—Hospital Benefit Included

Newark, N. J. — The 57-year-old North American Accident Insurance Company announces a new plan that pays $25 a week for both stated accidents and sickness. Plus an additional $25 a week for many accidents requiring hospital confinement. Yet the total cost is only $12 a year. The purpose of this new Premier Limited Double Duty Policy is to bring sickness and accident protection within the reach of men and women who do not have large savings with which to meet sudden doctor or hospital bills, or lost income.

This new plan also has a double-indemnity feature covering travel accidents. You receive $50 a week if disabled by an accident in a bus, taxicab, street car, train, etc., and $75 a week if the accident requires hospital confinement. There is another new special clause that pays cash for most doctor bills, even minor accidents such as a cut finger. Thus all accidents are provided for. In case of death by a common accident, the policy pays one thousand dollars cash to your family. Two thousand dollars if caused by travel accident. In addition, it covers many common sicknesses such as pneumonia, cancer, appendicitis, etc., paying $25 weekly benefits whether confined to home or hospital.

The entire cost is only $12 a year, and that applies to men and women between the ages of 16 and 69. For people between the ages of 69 and 75 the cost is only $15 a year. No medical examination is required.

North American Accident Insurance Company of Chicago is one of America's great insurance companies, the largest and oldest exclusive health and accident insurance company in this country. It has paid out more than $33,000,000 to grateful policyholders when they needed help most. North American's policy has been approved by State Insurance Departments.

Men and women who would like full details about this new plan are urged to write a letter or postcard for a revealing booklet called "Cash or Sympathy." This booklet is absolutely free. It will come by ordinary mail, without charge or obligation of any kind. No one will call to deliver it. We suggest you get a copy of this free booklet by writing North American Accident Insurance Co., 1550 Title Building, Newark 2, New Jersey.

(Advt.)

TO OUR READERS: Our new attractive space-saving typography conserves paper in conformity with government rationing—and there is NO REDUCTION in reading matter.

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"Starve or Pay High" Was the Edict of a Tyrant of the Dakota Bad Lands—and the Masked Rider Met the Sinister Challenge with Flaming Payment in Six-gun Coin! *13*

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64 PAGE BOOK

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See How I Train You at Home in Spare Time to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

J. E. SMITH
President
National Radio Institute
Established 29 Years

Here's your chance to get a good job in a busy wartime field with a bright peacetime future! There is a real shortage today of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. So mail the Coupon for a FREE sample lesson and a copy of my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs; tells how N.R.I. trains you at home in spare time; how you get practical experience by building real Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

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$10 a Week in Spare Time

"I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week—just spare time." JOHN JERRY, 1337 Kalamath St., Denver, Colo.

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"For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N.R.I. to thank for my start in this field." ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

1st Lieutenant In Signal Corps

"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N.R.I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." RICHARD W. ANDERSON (address omitted for military reasons).

More Radio Technicians, Operators Now Make $50 a Week Than Ever Before

Fixing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets, which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting stations, Aviation and Police Radio, and other Radio branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, now working on Government orders for Radio equipment, employ trained men. The Government, too, needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men and women. You may never see a time again when it will be so easy to get started in this fascinating field.

Many Beginners Soon Make $5, $10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

The moment you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to earn EXTRA money fixing Radios. Many make $5, $10 a week EXTRA in spare time while learning. I send you SIX big kits of real Radio parts. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building typical circuits—PROVE what you learn by interesting tests on the circuits you build.

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Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon now! Learning Radio helps Service men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, much higher pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Over 1,700 Service men now enrolled.

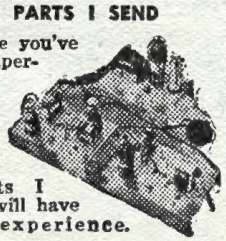
Be Ready to Cash In On Good Pay Jobs Coming in Television, Electronics

Think of the NEW jobs that Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronics, and other Radio developments will open after the war! You have a real opportunity. Get into Radio NOW and be ready to cash in when Victory releases these amazing wartime Radio developments for peacetime uses!

The opportunity the war has given beginners to get started in the fascinating field of Radio may never be repeated. So take the first step at once. Get my FREE Lesson and 64-page, illustrated book. No obligation—no salesman will call. Just mail Coupon in an envelope or paste it on a penny postcard. —J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4AO9, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS

YOU BUILD MANY CIRCUITS WITH PARTS I SEND



By the time you've built this Superheterodyne and many other Radio circuits with the six big kits of Radio parts I send, you will have valuable experience.

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON FREE

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Mail me FREE, without obligation, your Sample Lesson and 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, waddies, get your cayuses saddled and let's hit the trail, it's time for another trail ride and more Trail Talk and we hope you enjoy it as we do, for there are always interesting stories to be told of the early day western trails, along which there were adventure, danger and romance.

We will forever be in the debt of those brave and hardy men and women, the western pioneers, who braved hardships and perils, who spent long weary hours, days, and weeks, in the saddle, or in covered wagons in their long, slow trek westward, who camped

Foghorn Clancy

at night in wild country with the howls of savage beasts about them and in constant fear of the Indians, that they might build homes for themselves and their families.

Most of those old pioneers were home-loving, peace-loving people. True, there were among the early day settlers of the west many bad men, men who went west in search of a quick fortune, and cared not whether they acquired that wealth by fair means or foul. Some of them preferred to take wealth from its rightful owners because it was their way of living, their way of obtaining whatever they wanted and they enjoyed it.

It seemed that some of those bad men of the early west actually enjoyed seeing others suffer, and these men made the job of winning the west to civilization by the real home-loving, peacefully-inclined pioneers doubly difficult and hazardous.

Wanted Men

Many of the lawless element who invaded the early west were outlaws before they started west, they were wanted men, whom the law had almost caught up to in their home section and they made the trip to dodge the law. They left a trail of crime behind them whenever they moved onto a new section.

We will start our trail trip this time in the middle west, and will as usual go westward, but we will probably get no further than Arizona. There are many interesting places in the state that had a great bearing on the winning of that section of the west to civilization.

There are so many stories of the brave lawmen, the outlaws and Indians, of exciting times, gun-battles and strife between civilization and outlawry that in all probability we will linger among those scenes until it is too late to go further on the one trip.

From Wilderness to Empire

One man who watched the west grow from a lawless wilderness to an empire, who did his bit to help and made, if not a famous name for himself, a well known and honored one, was William M. Breakenridge. Sixty years ago out in the wide open spaces they called him Billy Breakenridge, but in later years he has been known as and called "Uncle" Billy.

He was not the rip-roaring, snorting gunman of the type so common in the west when he first went there. He was not as famous as Wild Bill Hickok or Bat Masterson, not as quick on the draw as Billy The Kid, or Doc Holliday, but was steady, sure, peace-loving, but unafraid.

He had the courage of his convictions, the nerve or sand to back his word when neces-

(Continued on page 10)

NOW! MUSIC LESSONS

for less than 7¢ a day!

Thousands have learned to play this quick, easy short-cut way, right at home—AND YOU CAN, TOO!

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That's why it's such fun learning music this modern, short-cut U. S. School way. You learn to play by playing. With this amazingly quick, easy method you need no special talent or previous musical training. Neither do you need to spend endless hours on humdrum scales and tedious exercises. You learn to play real tunes almost from the start. And you can't go wrong. Because first you are *told* how to do a thing by the simple printed instructions. Then a picture or diagram *shows* you how to do it. Finally you do it yourself and hear how it sounds. Nothing could be clearer. And sooner than you ever expected you'll be thrilled to find that you can pick up almost any popular piece and play it by note.

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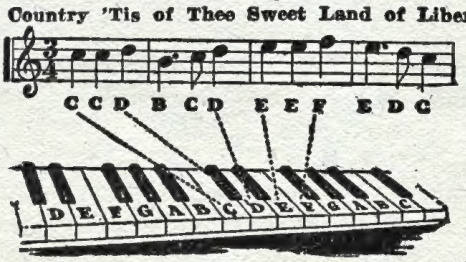
*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by Professional Models.

See how easy it is!

My Country 'Tis of Thee Sweet Land of Liberty

Look at the diagram. The first note on the music is "C". Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "C" on the piano. Find the other notes the same way. Now strike the notes as indicated and you'll be playing the melody of the famous patriotic hymn, "America." Easy as A-B-C, isn't it?

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Name .....
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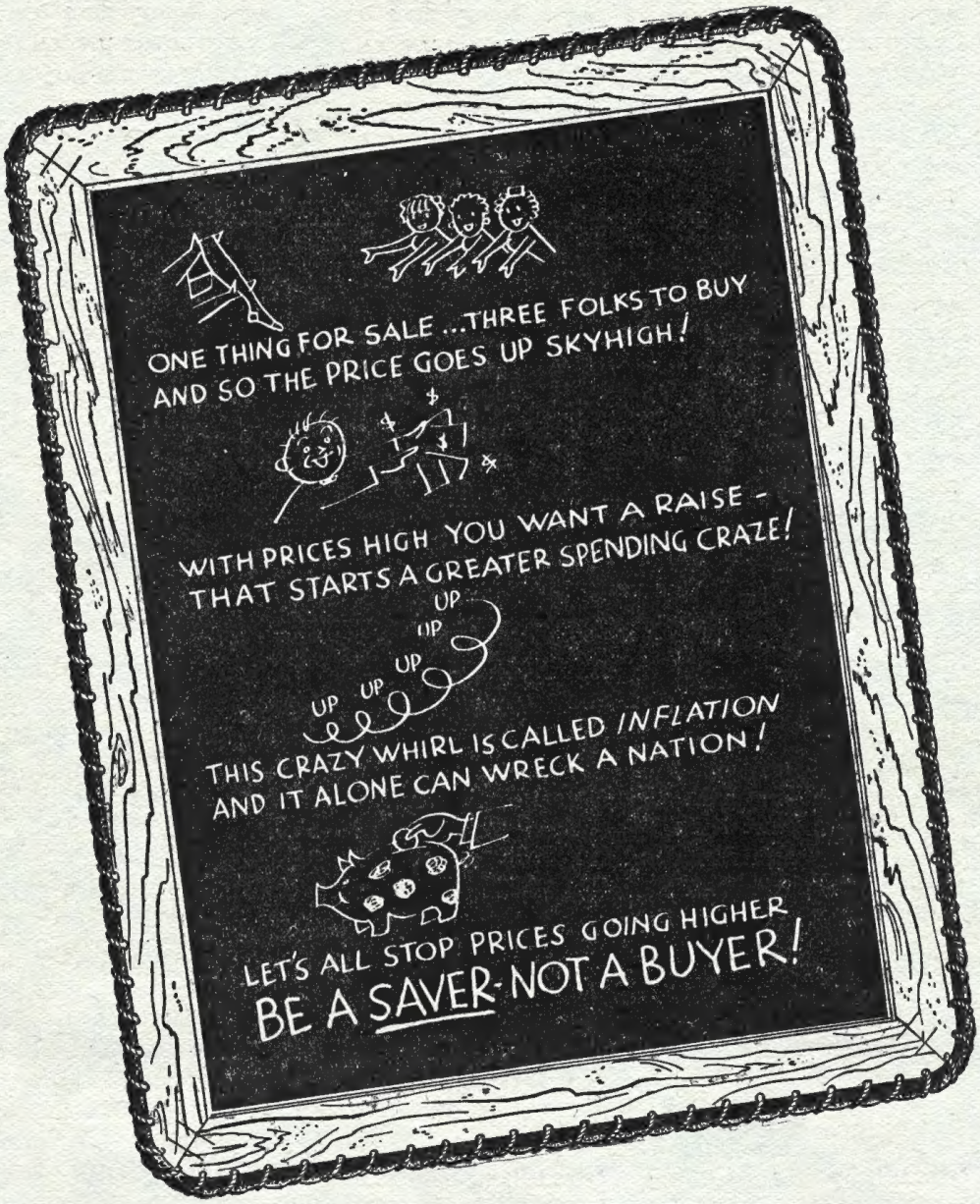
City ..... State.....

NOTE: If you are under 16 years parent must sign coupon.

Save 2¢ — Stick coupon on penny postcard.


ONE THING FOR SALE ...THREE FOLKS TO BUY
AND SO THE PRICE GOES UP SKYHIGH!
WITH PRICES HIGH YOU WANT A RAISE -
THAT STARTS A GREATER SPENDING CRAZE!
UP
UP
UP
UP
UP
THIS CRAZY WHIRL IS CALLED INFLATION
AND IT ALONE CAN WRECK A NATION!
LET'S ALL STOP PRICES GOING HIGHER
BE A SAVER-NOT A BUYER!

Seven things you should do:

1. Buy only what you really need	**2.** Pay no more than ceiling prices... buy rationed goods only with stamps	**3.** Pay off old debts and avoid making new ones	**4.** Support higher taxes ...pay them willingly	**5.** Provide for the future with adequate life insurance and savings	**6.** Don't ask more money for goods you sell or work you do	**7.** Buy all the War Bonds you can afford – and keep them

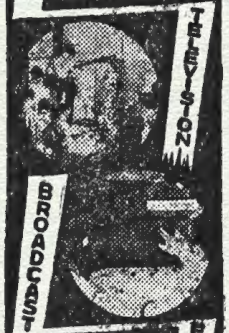
Keep prices down...use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without

This advertisement, prepared by the War Advertising Council, is contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

MEN whether you are 16 OR UP TO 50

Come to COYNE for a great future in

RADIO COMMUNICATIONS AND ELECTRONICS



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Airports, radio stations, film studios, police short-wave, television, industrial electronics — all need TRAINED RADIO SPECIALISTS. Learn the quick practical way, on actual equipment in the great Coyne Shops. Not by correspondence, but personal training based on 44 years of "know-how"!

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Send FREE BOOK, "Your Future in Radio", and details of easy "Pay-After-Graduation" plan.

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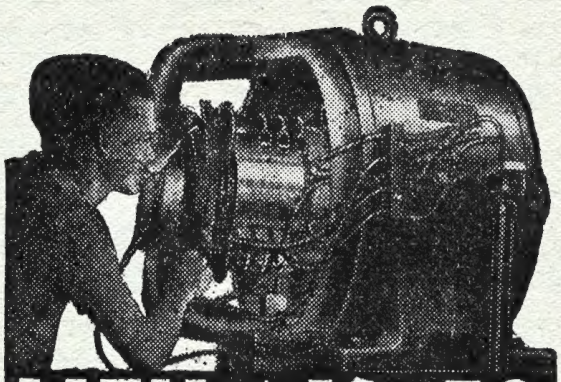

MEN whether you are 16 OR UP TO 50

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"Learn-by-Doing" in the Great Coyne Shops

Get ready for a big future the quick Coyne Way—by actual work on full-size electrical equipment, not by correspondence. Learn wiring, motors, power plants, switchboards, auto and aircraft electricity, refrigeration, air condioning. Be an "All-Round Electrical Man" — prepared for the big opportunities!

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My "Pay-Tuition-after-Graduation" plan enables you to start right away, and pay for your tuition in easy payments when finished. If you need part-time work to help defray expenses while here, I'll help you get it.

You Don't Need Experience or Advanced Education!

Coyne Training is simplified. Many fellows with no experience or advanced education owe their present good jobs to my easy, step-by-step methods. You'll find Coyne boosters wherever Electricity is known!

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RADIO and ELECTRONICS Now Included!

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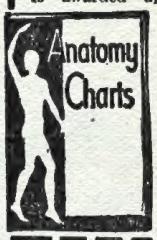

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Complete
Newest Styles!

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16 DAYS' Trial Offer

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE of SATISFACTION
If you're not 100% satisfied with glasses we make we'll refund every cent you pay us.

Write TODAY for FREE catalog, scientific test chart.

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Place your songs with us. Melodies supplied WITHOUT CHARGE by well known Hollywood composers. We record your song and make it presentable to the publishers. Lead sheets and records furnished. Send your song material for free examination. Write for details.

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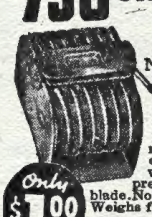
BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF.

'730 SHAVES FROM 1 BLADE'

AMAZING NEW BLADE SHARPENER



New sharpener for all makes of double-edge razor blades performs miracles! "Not necessary to change blades," writes one user. Another says, "Have used 1 blade over 730 times." RAZOROLL really sharpens blades because it strops on leather. Gives keen, smooth shaving edges. No guesswork. Blade held at correct angle and proper pressure—automatically. Just turn crank to sharpen blade. No gears. Well made. Handsome, compact, sturdy. Weighs few ounces. Will last years. Makes ideal gift.

Only $1.00

SEND NO MONEY! Write today. Pay postman only $1 plus few cents postage. Use RAZOROLL for 5 days and if you're not delighted with smooth, velvet shaves you get, return RAZOROLL and we'll return your dollar. Hurry—order today. RAZOROLL COMPANY
620 North Michigan Avenue, Dept. 201, Chicago, Illinois

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

sary, and yet it was just love of adventure that caused him to run away from home and start westward when a kid of fourteen.

Some went west in those early days in search of a fortune. A lust for wealth was the driving force behind them. Others simply for adventure, they wanted to go somewhere to do something and if the place they were going to was a wild country fraught with danger, so much the better!

Ambushed by Indians

Billy Breakenridge landed in Denver, Colorado, in 1862. He had spent his early childhood on a farm in Wisconsin. He was a tough, wiry youth, full of life and energy, not afraid of work. He came in with a freight wagon train, and there was always plenty of work, sometimes privation and always a new adventure along the route of those wagon trains.

The very first trip came near being his last, as he was ambushed and shot at by Indians as he rode to catch a couple of mules that had strayed from the overnight camp, but the poor marksmanship of the Indians allowed many to live who would not have seen very much of life in the west had the Indians been good marksmen.

Many of those freight wagon trains contained twenty or thirty wagons, with four or six head of oxen or mules to each wagon. When they camped at night the wagons were drawn up in a circle, the inside of the circle forming a corral for the stock so that they might be turned loose for a little grazing and be free from the yoke or harness they must necessarily endure during the day of pulling the heavy wagons.

Then too the wagons formed a kind of barricade or defense in case of attack by Indians.

A Raw, Wild Town

Denver was a raw, wild town when Bill Breakenridge first arrived there, and it played a big part in the ever-shifting scenes of the drama of the west.

There was the store built by Uncle Dick Wootten, friend and fellow scout of Kit Carson. It was used as the first town hall in the Rockies. Close by was the Elephant Corral into which Billy drove the mule teams he had skinned across the plains. Not far from the Elephant Corral, so called because it was said to be stout enough to hold an elephant, was the Denver House, a huge house where gambling and drinking went on day and night.

Here too was the office of the Leavenworth and Pike's Stage Company, the terminus of one branch of the Overland Trail, and here too on winding Speer Boulevard, William N. Byers set up the first newspaper between the Missouri River and California.

Speer Boulevard also skirts the dueling ground where Lucien W. Bliss and Dr. J. S. Stone, both leading citizens of Denver, fought at thirty paces with shotguns loaded with ball and where Stone fell mortally wounded.

Battles and Massacres

Denver was beginning to feel its importance when Breakenridge arrived there. It had be-

gun to stamp out organized lawlessness, but there was plenty of resistance left among the element of bad men who were among its inhabitants. The Civil War was in progress, and the plains Indians, taking advantage of this, had flamed into furious warfare against the divided whites. Stage coach stations were raided and burned, emigrant trains were slaughtered. The Overland Trail was an adventure where death lurked in the shadows of the hills every foot of the way.

Yet the Wisconsin boy came through over the long and treacherous trail, practically treading the very rim of eternity on two or three occasions on the trip. He arrived, healthy and happy, but his adventures were not over by any means. More than fifty citizens of Denver were killed by Indians the year that Breakenridge arrived, hundreds of others were scalped before they reached the town, in the battles along the trail.

A Square-Shooter

Billy Breakenridge was the kind of character who could watch with respect when two men stood up in a fair fight. If a fight could not be avoided, then let it be a fair fight, was his way of reasoning, but the Indian fashion of hiding and watching the approach of a wagon train, of scouting to determine to what extent the intended victims were armed, and pouncing upon those found weak or poorly armed, murdering, scalping, plundering, this kind of fighting was against his better sense of fair play.

Boy though he was, young Breakenridge enlisted in the company which left Denver to punish the Indians and to try and put a stop to such raids and massacres.

He had plenty of adventure as an Indian fighter, and many close calls. It may not take an extra brave man to charge upon a band of Indians with a cavalry troop, but it does take a brave man to go on guard in hostile Indian country, when it is known that the Redmen have planned a raid, to sit all alone through the dark hours of the night, peering through the gloom, listening for the slightest sound that will betray the presence of the enemy.

When a man knows how silently and stealthily the Indians move, when he fights to keep awake, lest he fall asleep and be murdered and scalped before he has any chance to defend himself, and then when morning comes, and he discovers as Breakenridge did on more than one occasion, that Indians had stolen within thirty feet of where he watched without knowing of his presence or betraying their own, one can draw a mental picture of what a nerve-racking vigil this kind of duty was.

(Continued on page 91)

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A black-clad horseman came tearing out of the shadows with Colts blazing (CHAPTER II)

THE DEVIL'S RANGE

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

"Starve or Pay High" Was the Edict of a Tyrant of the Dakota Bad Lands — and the Masked Rider Met the Sinister Challenge with Flaming Payment in Six-gun Coin!

CHAPTER I

Night Attack

NIGHT dropped a black mantle over the Bad Lands of South Dakota. The wild country became a place of somber shifting shadows, sudden uprearing rocks and mystic reaches of barren sands.

In this vast bowl of liquid blackness a pinpoint of fire glowed. This was the campfire of the Bar C trail herd, where Jim Channing and his drivers had bedded their longhorns for the night.

Channing sat hugging his knees, and staring into the fire with his foreman. The rest of the crew, with the exception of the night-hawk, out with the cattle, were motionless rolls of blanket, still and sleeping with the exhaustion of a long day's killing drive.

"Still a hundred miles to go," Channing said softly. "And every foot of it bad. I'll be glad when this drive's over, Joe."

A Complete Book-Length Masked Rider Novel

Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk Wage Grim

He was young, the owner of the Bar C, with a young man's strong, keen face and little knots of determined muscle bunched at the corners of his jaw. He looked capable, alert and efficient. He had become a ranch owner the hard way, working for a cowhand's wages since he'd been a boy, saving every hard-won cent, dreaming a young man's stubborn dream that some day he'd have a ranch and herds of his own.

Saving money a dollar at a time, he realized, was a process which would take entirely too long; but at twenty-eight an unexpected legacy from a little-known uncle had added ten thousand dollars to his tiny hoard. With this he had made the plunge and started the Bar C. In four years the ranch had begun to pay. But it was only eternal vigilance that kept him in the black.

"A hundred miles ain't much," Joe Green said. The stocky foreman, older than his boss, masked anxiety with an elaborately casual tone. "*If* we make it."

Channing glanced at him.

"Worried about them stories we been hearin', Joe?"

Green shrugged.

"Five trail herds cut to pieces, most of the cows run off, men killed and wounded—all them stories was too much alike to be fairy tales, Jim."

"The Black Band sounds a little like a fairy tale," Channing said.

"Yes, I reckon. But that don't mean there ain't a rustler gang operatin' here. Callin' 'em the Black Band is like callin' a feller Shorty 'cause yuh don't know his name."

CHANNING made no answer and the conversation died. Although each man tried to hide it for fear of disturbing the other, each was uneasy, each was straining his ears into the blackness for some alien sound.

The black mantle that hung over them was more than just night. It had a forbidding, uneasy quality that had begun to prey on their nerves. Secretly, each had been listening this way for sounds ever since the trail herd had reached the edge of the Bad Land country.

Westward they heard the night-hawk singing as he patrolled the edges of the herd. Even his song was strange and lonely as though he were whistling in the dark to keep up his own courage.

"Listen!" Channing raised his head sharply.

"What?"

Channing put out his hand for silence, bent his head and strained to hear. Then he lay down and pressed his ear to the earth.

"What is it?" Green whispered.

"Coulda swore I heard horses," Channing said. "Nothin' now. Shucks, Joe, we're gettin' so jumpy we'll be runnin' from jack-rabbits. We'd better forget it and get some sleep."

"Yeah, but it might be better to be ready for trouble," Joe Green said gloomily. "Reckon I'll stay—" He broke off sharply. "I heard it then, Jim. Hosses!"

Channing came swiftly to his feet, lean and tall in the erratic light of the dying fire. He swung his holster around.

"Rouse the men," he ordered. "This might be just nerves, Joe, but we can't take chances."

Green went among the sleeping forms with a low word and the bundles stirred to instant life. Ten men climbed out of their blankets, staggering with weariness, but with no word of complaint. Only the cook swore in a mumbled monotone.

"What's doin', Jim?"

"Somethin' funny out there in the dark," Channing explained. "Mebbe nothin', but we can't take chances. Get out there with the herd, and cover them cows, boys."

The waddies yanked on boots and buckled gun-belts into place. Rubbing sleep from their eyes, they dashed for the rope corral. To Channing, waiting by the firelight, came the sudden disturbed stamp of horses, the imprecations of the riders and the slap of leather.

And then, suddenly, like a whirlwind, death burst upon them out of the brooding night. It came in a sudden whirl of pounding hoofs. It swept out of the barren sand and roared down upon the herd like a cyclone.

A packed group of riders loomed suddenly against the lighter sky and Channing gasped as he saw their silhouettes.

Battle Against the Dreaded Black Band!

They were tall weird shadows with no faces! Then he realized that there were black masks where the pale glimmer of faces should be.

"The Black Band!" Channing bellowed. "Scatter, men!"

He was yanking his own gun as he spoke, and twisting down and away from the revealing firelight. His gun lanced an orange streak through the night and he saw a masked silhouette sway sideward and disappear. Somewhere a man cried out in the dark as shots quickly took up the echo of Channing's and the ranch owner thought he recognized his night-hawk's voice.

Then the thundering pack burst over and around him and in the next instant Channing found himself in the mad center of a whirling, screaming torrent of plunging horses, bawling cattle and thundering guns. In that confused maelstrom it was impossible to see, but the Bar C cowboys knew they were outnumbered three to one and they fired desperately at the barely glimpsed figures slashing into the herd from three sides.

IN THIS bedlam of rearing ghostly shapes, flash of gun flame and thunder of explosions, no one saw the two riders who appeared suddenly on top of a mesa, attacted by the heavy crush of guns below.

One of the horsemen was mounted on a magnificent black stallion, and the rider was as impressive as his mount. A black cloak was draped about wide shoulders, a black sombrero shaded a thin, strongly intellectual countenance. Although his eyes were invisible in the night, peering through holes in a mask, they were a clear, cold blue. Beneath the edge of the mask were a straight-lipped mouth and a square, uncompromising chin.

WAYNE MORGAN

This was the Masked Rider, the famous Robin Hood outlaw of the West who, true to his reputation, was proving his uncanny knack for showing up wherever there was trouble. That had made folks think he was something a little more than human.

With him was an Indian, a slender whipcord man dressed simply in white shirt and drill trousers with a red sash

about his waist. His black hair was shoulder length, held in place by a bandeau that matched his sash. He wore no holstered six-gun but there was a sheath knife in his belt and a rifle in his saddle-boot. He was mounted on a gray horse.

The Indian's eyes, sharper than any white man's could be, strained down into the heaving violence of the gulch below.

"Masked men attack a herd, Senor," he reported. "Many of them—a big raid."

"Masked men, eh?" the cloaked rider repeated. "Wonder how they'd like another masked man to join in?"

"The cowboys are falling, Senor," Blue Hawk said, pointing. "Look—there are too many of the bandits."

His English was precise and clear, for he had learned it at a mission school.

"All right," the Masked Rider said. "Let's take a hand. Can yuh find yore way down off this butte, Hawk?"

The Indian merely glanced at him as though amused that such a question need be put. Then he wheeled his gray horse and the Masked Rider followed.

The Robin Hood outlaw was already a living legend. His name was whispered in hate by hard-eyed men who lived by the rule of the six-gun. Plodding sodbusters spoke of him with awe as they worked the soil. Cattlemen and waddies mentioned him with respect in their bunkhouses. All told of a fighting fury who hated greed and oppression, who battled savagely on the side of the poor and downtrodden, even though he himself was an outlaw, a wanderer of the owlhoot trails.

Though young, his past was a closed book. Not even Blue Hawk, the Yaqui, knew his real name. There were times when he assumed the rôle of Wayne Morgan, a wandering cowboy. That part he could make convincing to anyone, for he was an experienced cowhand and bronco buster, though no one knew where he had learned his expertness.

Blue Hawk felt his way along the mesa in inky blackness and stopped.

"Here is a way down, Senor," he said. "Be careful—it is steep."

And as their horses began to slide down the rocky, crumbling trail with bunched feet, the sound of gunfire still roared up menacingly from the pit of blackness below.

CHAPTER II

Death in the Bad Lands

JIM CHANNING seemed to be living in a red haze of blazing guns and furious din. Bullets tore at his clothing, riddled the crown of his Stetson. But by some freak of Fate he had not as yet been seriously wounded.

"Keep fighting, boys!" he shouted again and again, though not even sure how many—if any—of his men were still alive. "We'll lick 'em yet!"

The herd was no longer under control. The cattle had surged forward, gaining speed as they broke into a stampede. One longhorn after another rushed by Jim Channing as he sat his saddle, firing steadily at the rustlers.

The Black Band men were circling like a bunch of Indians attacking a wagon train. Their guns were roaring steadily.

Jim Channing went down as his horse was shot from under him. He landed near a big boulder and sprawled there half dazed, the wind knocked out of him.

The stampeding cattle pounded close to him—but swerved aside to avoid the big rock. He did not move, for if the rustlers thought he was dead—that was his only chance to remain alive.

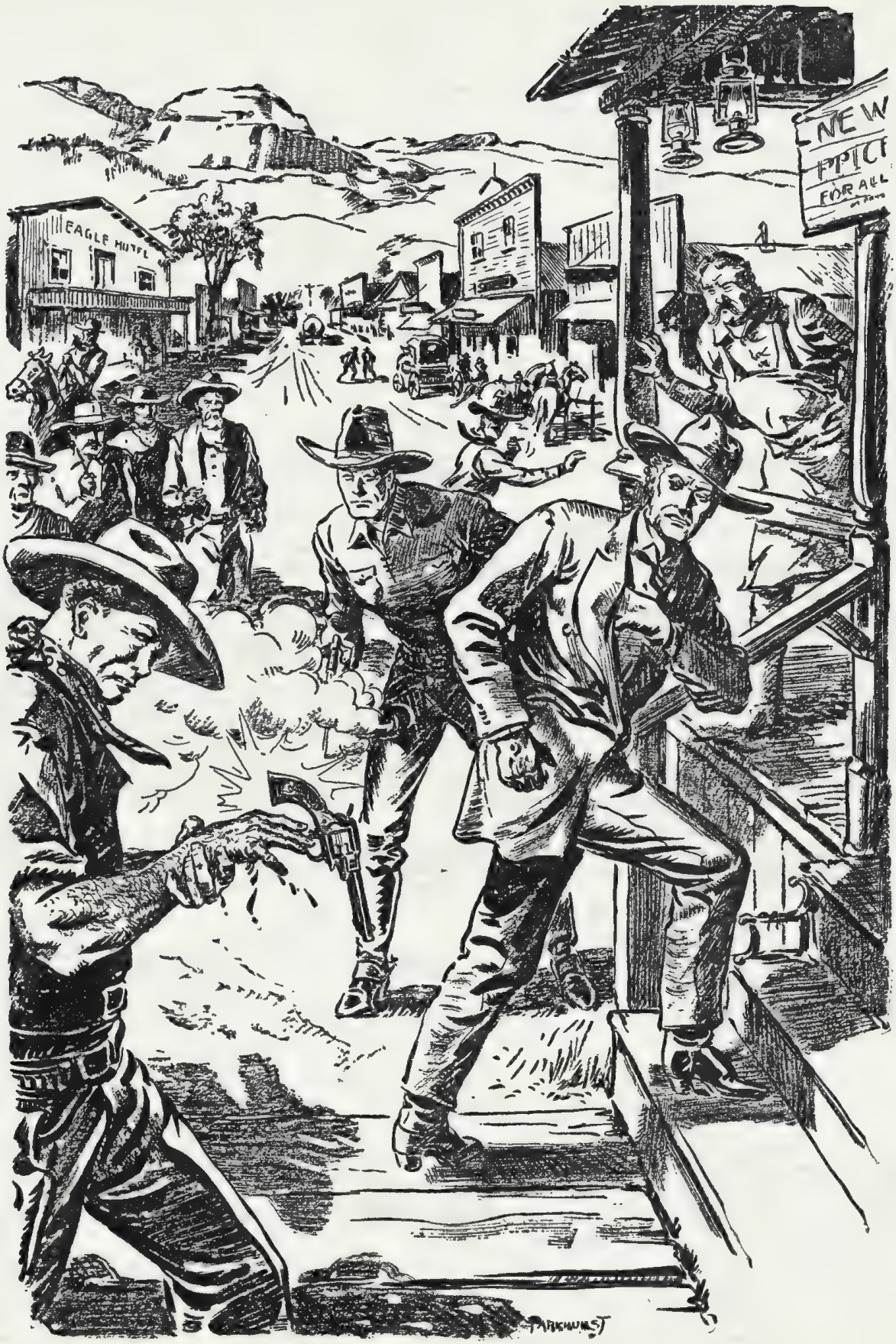
Suddenly he heard a shout, then the roaring of six-guns coming from another direction—from off to his left. He risked raising his head for a glance. And stared unbelievingly as he saw a black-clad horseman come tearing out of the shadows with Colts blazing.

"The Masked Rider!" he muttered. "It must be! The fightin' hombre I've heard so much about!"

The black-clad horseman's guns were taking toll of the circling rustlers. Somewhere back in the shadows a rifle roared steadily. Blue Hawk had gone into action there. Ten rustlers had died in the battle with the trail herd crew, but at least twenty of them were still alive and fighting hard.

"Light out after that herd, all of yuh!" shouted the Black Band leader. "We don't want to lose them cattle!"

The Masked Rider disappeared in the shadows and halted his great horse, Midnight, to reload his guns. He shot three



Morgan's bullet struck the back-shooting waddy in the hand (CHAPTER IV)

rustlers out of their saddles, and wounded others. But before he could rush out into the battling again, he heard the loud drumming of hoofs as the rustlers departed to obey their leader. In a few moments they had disappeared into the darkness on the trail of the stampeding cattle.

With his guns again reloaded, the Masked Rider quickly rode to where the Yaqui was stationed with his rifle.

"Trail that bunch of sidewinders, Hawk," he ordered. "See if yuh can learn where they'll take that herd when they get them cows quieted down."

"Where will I find you when I learn about the herd, Senor?" said Blue Hawk.

"At the hide-out where we left our other hosses," the Masked Rider told him. "I'll get there as soon as I can make it. Wayne Morgan might have to head for the nearest town to see what's goin' on around here."

"So far it just looks like big band of rustlers stealing a trail herd," the Yaqui remarked questioningly. "You think maybe there is more to it, Senor?"

"Hard to tell." The Masked Rider shook his head. "But I aim to find out. You better get goin', Hawk."

THE INDIAN nodded and headed back into the shadows for his gray horse. The Masked Rider rode out into the big gulch as Jim Channing got weakly to his feet. The ranch owner stood waiting for the black-clad horseman to approach.

"Figger yuh must be the Masked Rider," Channing said, as the man halted the black horse beside him. "Am I right?"

"Yuh shore are." The Masked Rider smiled. "Who are you?"

"Jim Channing," said the rancher. "I was takin' a trail herd of longhorns to the railroad town a hundred miles east of here when the Black Band attacked my outfit."

He stared at the still forms lying all about. There was bitterness in his heart at the realization that not one of his outfit who had fought with him had been left alive. He was glad he had sent young Herb Brown away with the cavvy. At least the kid wrangler still ived.

"Looks like yore men put up a good fight," the Masked Rider said, and there was deep sympathy in his voice. "Reckon they was just outnumbered."

"Three to one," Channing said morosely. "But I'll make the Black Band pay for what they've done this night!"

"Who are they?" asked the Masked Rider. "Yuh know anything about them?"

"Not enough," Channing said angrily. "But we ranchers in the Spruce Valley region have been havin' a lot of rustler trouble lately." He shook his head dazedly, feeling strangely guilty that he was not even wounded while his men were dead. "Wait! Might be some of my crew still breathin'. I better look!"

It was growing lighter, for it would soon be dawn. The Masked Rider swung out of saddle and helped Jim Channing examine the bodies of the trail herd crew. All of them had been killed, even the cook had died fighting.

"What about the herd?" asked the Masked Rider. "Yuh aim to try and get it back?"

"I'll try," said Channing. "But there ain't much chance of findin' them cattle once they're driven back into the Bad Lands. There's been other herds stole, and nobody's been able to learn where they went. Matt Rockford who owns the Runnin' R was one who lost a big herd on a trail drive, only three weeks ago."

"How many of his men were killed?" demanded the Masked Rider.

"Six, I think," said Channing. "I don't rightly remember. A lot of 'em got away. Buck Allen, the Runnin' R foreman, don't take much chances with his men."

"Mebbe yuh better take a look at some of the dead rustlers—see if yuh recognize any of 'em," suggested the Masked Rider.

"Good idea," said Channing.

He examined the dead rustlers, removing the bandanna masks from their faces. Dawn broke, and by the time the owner of the Bar C had finished looking at the bodies the hot sunlight of early morning gleamed down.

"Never seen any of 'em before that I recollect," Jim Channing said. "Shore were a hard-faced bunch of hombres."

The Masked Rider agreed.

"What's the nearest town around here, Channing?" he asked.

"There ain't but one town anywheres near," said Channing. "Rocky Gulch. It's about ten miles northwest from here." He was looking around for a

mount. "I've got to get back to the spread and send some men to bring in those bodies," he said sadly. "Me, I've got to find a kid wrangler I sent away with the cavvy before trouble started."

HE managed to get close to a riderless horse that was lingering close by, and grab the reins. It gave him an odd feeling, remembering how Joe Green had always claimed that pinto was the best cutting horse in his string. The foreman wouldn't be needing that pinto any longer.

"I'll be leaving yuh, Channing," said the Masked Rider, as he swung into Midnight's saddle. "Might see yuh again if I stay in this part of the country."

"Hope so," said Channing. "I'm mighty grateful for how yuh helped out in the fightin'." He mounted the pinto. The dead man's saddle wasn't comfortable. Joe Green always had his stirrups shorter than most men.

"Sorry I didn't get a chance to do more," said the Masked Rider. "So long, Channing."

"So long."

Channing sat motionless until the black-clad man disappeared behind a clump of trees. Finally the owner of the Bar C smiled wanly.

"Some folks claim that hombre ain't nothin' but a killer who's wanted bad by the law," he told himself. "Shucks! Some even claim he might be ramroddin' them rustlers! I don't believe it."

He sighed and headed out to look for the wrangler. He did not look again at the dead men in the gulch. . . .

As soon as the Masked Rider was out of sight of Jim Channing he galloped swiftly to the hide-out in the hills that he and the Yaqui had found the previous day. It was a small box-canyon, one not easily found unless it was known where to look for it.

Here the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had left the two extra horses they usually took with them in their travels. One was a powerful hammerhead roan; the other a pinto.

The Masked Rider swung out of saddle and quickly stripped his gear off Midnight. As swiftly he saddled the roan. Removing his black cloak, mask, and black sombrero then, he placed them in his saddle-roll. He drew out a leather chaps over his dark levis. There was no need to change his blue flannel shirt, and when he had clapped a gray Stetson on his head all trace of the Masked Rider had gone.

In his place was Wayne Morgan, broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted. A man with character in his handsome dark face, dominated by keen blue eyes.

"I like that young Jim Channing," this Wayne Morgan was telling himself as he fastened his saddle-roll on the kak on the roan. "But I want to know more about all the folks in Spruce Valley. Reckon I'll head for Rocky Gulch town and see what I can learn."

He hobbled Midnight and the pinto, then rode away on the roan, heading for the town. And as he rode he was musing about a number of things that interested him concerning the Black Band, and the stealing of trail herds. He hoped Blue Hawk would be able to find where the rustlers took the stolen stock.

"And this Matt Rockford and his Runnin' R outfit that Jim Channing mentioned shore sound interesting," Wayne Morgan muttered, thinking aloud. "Sound like Rockford's outfit got away plumb easy, compared to what happened to Channing's crew."

CHAPTER III

Big Man of Rocky Gulch

HOT sunlight of a warm July morning beat down on the town of Rocky Gulch. It had been a dry summer, and plenty of dust was everywhere. It lingered in the street, on the buildings, and along the road that led northward from Spruce Valley to the town. In such weather men became short-tempered, and horses tired easily.

Craig Tolson, the town's most prosperous citizen, stepped out on the plank walk in front of the Eagle Hotel and stood there looking up and down the street of the little South Dakota cowtown with the air of a general reviewing his troops. He missed nothing, and appeared satisfied with what he saw.

He was a big, broad-shouldered man in his late forties. His hair was thick and dark, with just a touch of gray in it, his face was square and ruggedly

handsome, and his chin firm. Every morning he was freshly shaved by the town barber whose shop was in the hotel.

Tolson, in a dark suit, looked like a cattleman who was wearing his store clothes, for boots of soft leather were on his rather small feet, and a forty-dollar gray Stetson rested on his head. His white shirt was immaculate and his string tie carefully knotted.

He wore a .38 in a shoulder holster beneath his right arm, but his coat fitted so well the holster was not easily noticed. And he seldom used the gun. There were others to do his shooting for him.

His attitude was one of possession as he looked over the rows of weather-beaten buildings that lined either side of the street. Rocky Gulch was his town and he never forgot it.

Across the street from the hotel was a big boxlike structure with a sign running across the false front forming the second story. It read:

TOLSON'S GENERAL STORE

Down the street was the feed and grain store he also owned, and the harness shop that was his property. The Eagle Hotel also belonged to him, as did the biggest saloon in Rocky Gulch.

His gaze lingered on men who appeared to be loafing in various spots, all up and down the street. Mentally he checked them to assure himself that most of them were his men. They were, though here and there a citizen mingled with the others. Tolson did not consider them important.

Only the loungers who bore the stamp of seasoned gunslicks interested him. Knowing that these men were there, awaiting his orders, gave him a sense of power. It was as though he had set the stage and was waiting for the play to begin.

Tolson motioned to one of the men in the group in front of the general store, a man known as "Latigo" Drake, chief bodyguard of the boss of Rocky Gulch. Drake sauntered across the street to Tolson, his spurs jingling and his leather chaps rustling as he stepped through the dust, moving his booted feet like a high-spirited horse.

His hatchet face was expressionless. But his hands swung close to the white bone-handled butts of the guns in his tied down holsters, as though he always expected trouble.

"The boys are all set, Boss," Latigo Drake said as he reached Tolson's side. His voice, always rasping and unpleasant, at times grated on Tolson's nerves. "Yuh figger the ranchers will put up a holler when they come to town this mornin' for supplies?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it," Tolson spoke as calmly as a man discussing the weather, without being particularly interested. His voice was low and cultured and he never lapsed into a Western drawl. "Matt Rockford—all the rest of the ranch owners will seriously object to the change in prices I've been forced to make."

"Oh, shore." There was a mocking note in Latigo Drake's harsh voice. "It just can't be helped, though. Yuh just ain't been able to get any fresh stock in lately, so yuh had to raise the prices on what stuff yuh have on hand."

"Exactly, Latigo." Tolson nodded. "Unfortunate, but true."

"And could lead to gunplay," Drake said flatly.

CRAIG TOLSON no longer appeared to be paying attention. He was watching a rider on a hammerhead roan who was coming along the main street of Rocky Gulch. The rider was big and dark-haired, and his range clothes were well-worn.

Tolson could not recall ever having seen the man before, but this morning the boss of Rocky Gulch felt decidedly interested in any strangers. Particularly in one who looked as if he might have come from one of the six cattle spreads located along the Cheyenne River, to the southwest of the town.

"Don't recollect seein' that hombre before." Latigo Drake's rasping voice echoed Tolson's unspoken thoughts.

"Two guns," murmured Tolson, his gaze fixed on the rider. "And a quiet air of self-assurance that makes me feel he's not the common variety of cowhand."

"Seein' as I wear two guns myself," remarked Latigo Drake dreamily, his fingers lightly brushing the butts of his Colts, "might be that hombre and me have somethin' in common." A grin was on his sharp face as he glanced at his boss. "Yuh figger yuh'd rather not have a stranger in town, Boss?"

"I'll decide later," Tolson said indifferently, and turned his gaze toward the south end of the town. "Judging by that cloud of dust beyond the lower end of the town I suspect the cattlemen are arriving in a body." He sighed. "I hope they won't be inclined to do anything foolish."

"No shootin' unless Matt Rockford and his crowd start somethin'? asked Drake. "That's still orders, huh?"

"Right," said Tolson. "I hope to convince Rockford and the rest that this matter can be settled peaceably, I hate violence, Latigo."

Craig Tolson walked across the street to stand in front of the general store. The gunman followed.

The man on the roan swung out of saddle at the hitching-rail in front of the general store. He tied his reins to the long pole, then stretched as though to get rid of the saddle kinks after a long ride.

He sensed the strained atmosphere that hung over the town. He had observed it as soon as he had ridden into Rocky Gulch, for he was ever conscious of danger. He knew that it lingered here in the hot sunlight of early morning, and was ready for whatever might happen.

"Mornin'," he said in a low, drawling voice to Tolson and Drake. "I'm a stranger around this part of the country —Wayne Morgan is the name. Thought mebbe yuh might be able to tell me if there's any chances of gettin' a job with some spread in this section?"

For an instant Tolson stared at him without speaking. He noticed that the guns in Morgan's holsters looked as if they might have seen considerable use,— and that the dark blue flannel shirt covered a powerful chest and muscular arms.

The look from the blue eyes was so direct that Tolson finally was forced to lower his own gaze, hating himself because he did.

"Perhaps some of the ranchers around here might need an extra hand," he said, in answer to Morgan's question. "I wouldn't know."

"Or mebbe they might be needin' a gunslick." Latigo Drake looked coldly at Morgan. "Yuh never can tell."

"In which case they'd probably want a local product," said Morgan, looking

The Masked Rider brought the long barrel down with such force it knocked the robber unconscious (CHAPTER VI)

Drake over carefully from head to foot. "I wouldn't want to keep a man out of a job."

TOLSON smiled at the clash. For an instant it looked as if Latigo Drake would consider himself insulted and go for his guns. But there was something about Wayne Morgan's casual air of indifference that warned the gunslick that this might not be the time and the place to start anything.

"Thanks for telling me anyway," said Morgan.

He stepped back and calmly drew out papers and tobacco and rolled a quirly. Tolson and Drake seemed to loose interest in him as a group of riders loomed out of the dust cloud at the lower end of town.

Morgan, calmly smoking, sensed a growing tension as twenty riders headed their horses up the street. They rode bunched together as though expecting trouble and behind them lumbered four big ranch wagons drawn by two-horse teams. The cattlemen were arriving to stock up on supplies.

They halted their horses in front of the general store and swung out of saddles. A waddy took the reins of the horses, holding the mounts.

A big elderly man strode forward to face Craig Tolson. The cattleman was thin-faced and rawboned, and his hair was iron-gray. There was an air of leadership about him as he stood there, with most of the other men he had brought with him crowding close.

"Mornin', Tolson," he said shortly, to the boss of the town. "We've come to stock up on supplies, like we usually do around the first of the month."

"Glad to let you ranchers have all I've got, Rockford." Tolson's attitude was calm and friendly. "But it's been over a month since I've been able to get stuff shipped in, so I've had to raise my prices a little."

As Wayne Morgan heard the rancher addressed by name he realized he was the Matt Rockford of whom Jim Channing had spoken, and owner of the Running R, the biggest ranch between Rocky Gulch and the Black Hills.

"I've been hearin' some such talk," Rockford said to Tolson. "But I didn't believe it. What yuh chargin' for potatoes by the barrel?"

"Cost you a hundred dollars for a barrel of potatoes," Tolson said quietly. "Twenty-five dollars for a bag of flour, and—well, everything is higher."

The ranchers scowled and glanced at each other aghast. There had been rumors spreading regarding the impossibly high prices being demanded in Rocky Gulch for supplies—but the six ranch owners had been unable to believe the grapevine. It seemed unbelievable, now that they heard the truth from Tolson himself.

"A hundred dollars for a barrel of potatoes!" shouted Rockford, controlling his temper only with effort. "Why, that's highway robbery! And you know it, Tolson! It ain't enough that rustlers been stealin' our stock and killin' our men. Now you got to try and do somethin' like this to us!"

"It can't be helped," Tolson said firmly. "The river boat that brings my supplies is nearly three weeks late, and you know how difficult it is to get stuff sent overland by freight wagons through the Bad Lands. I just have to charge higher prices for what little stock I have on hand."

Ranchers and their waddies stirred restlessly. The drivers of the four big ranch wagons were waiting for their bosses to give them their orders to load up. They had halted their teams further down the street and were unable to overhear what was being said in front of the general store.

WAYNE MORGAN'S sympathies were all with the ranchers. In his mind there was no doubt that Craig Tolson was deliberately trying to fleece the cattlemen, but he couldn't understand what the storekeeper hoped to gain by that. Could there be any connection between this move of Tolson's and the rustling of the trail herds?

"Yuh're lying, Tolson!" Jim Channing challenged. The young owner of the Bar C who had ridden in with the ranchers, stepped up beside Rockford. "I lost a trail herd and ten of my men last night when rustlers attacked us, and I ain't in no humor for this high-handed business yuh're pullin' now."

"Rockford is the ranchers' leader, Channing," Tolson said coolly. "I'll do my talking to him."

"Because yuh're afraid I might ask

yuh too many questions about the rustling?" demanded Channing angrily. Mebbe yuh know somethin' about *that*, Tolson!"

CHAPTER IV

Pay—or Starve!

FOR a moment a breathless hush hung over the men in front of Tolson's general store. Jim Channing's words seemed to linger in the hot, dry air—a challenge to the boss of Rocky Gulch.

Behind Tolson on the plank walk Latigo Drake moved restlessly, his hands close to the butts of his guns. It would take only a word more to start trouble.

"Nonsense, Channing," Craig Tolson said, his voice cool and his manner unflurried. "I know nothing at all about the rustling. Anyhow, that doesn't happen to be the subject under discussion. If you have lost a trail herd and some of your men have been killed I'm sorry. But to get back to what we have been talking about. If you ranchers don't want to pay my prices you don't need to buy my stuff."

The cattlemen looked at each other, as though seeking an answer to an unanswerable situation.

"But we've got to eat," protested old Brad Watson, owner of the Triangle outfit. "None of us raise food—only handle beef—"

"We won't even be handlin' that if this rustlin' keeps up," Jim Channing sharply interrupted.

"Our families need potatoes and flour and canned goods," Watson hurried on, ignoring the owner of the Bar C. "We've *got* to have them—that's all there is to it!"

"You can have all you want if you're willing to pay my prices," said Tolson. "That's final."

He turned his back on the cattlemen and walked toward the door of the general store as though weary of argument. The ranchers just stood there, glaring at his broad back.

Morgan apparently was the only one who saw a hard-faced waddy, standing behind and a little to one side of the cattlemen, reach for his gun. He drew and aimed at Craig Tolson's back.

"Look out, Tolson!" Morgan shouted.

His right hand flashed to his holster and came up with his heavy Colt roaring. The bullet struck the hand of the waddy who had been about to shoot Tolson in the back. The gun went flying as the puncher howled with pain and glared at his blood-stained hand.

Tolson whirled, his hand darting to his shoulder holster. In one glance he saw what had happened, but it had all taken place too quickly for the cattlemen to understand what had occurred.

"He tried to back-shoot you!" Morgan said grimly, in answer to Tolson's inquiring look. "I had to stop him, pronto."

"Joe Gary, eh?" Tolson glowered at the wounded man. "One of your waddies, Rockford. Maybe he was acting under your orders."

"I don't give orders to shoot a man in the back!" Rockford growled, and his look also was intent on the hard-faced waddy. "Yuh're fired, Gary. Yuh can get yore pay and leave soon as we get back to the ranch."

Young Jim Channing stood looking at Morgan, a hard expression in his eyes.

"So yuh've hired a new gunhand, uh, Tolson?" Channing glanced mockingly at Latigo Drake. "What's the matter? Is Drake slippin'?"

Drake scowled, and deadly hate was in the glance he shot at Morgan. In that instant Wayne Morgan knew he had made a lasting enemy. Latigo Drake resented the fact that Morgan and not he had saved Craig Tolson's life.

"It don't matter how many gunslicks yuh got sidin' yuh, Tolson," Matt Rockford said quickly. "We ain't afraid of any of yore killers. We've come to town to get supplies and we're goin' to get 'em if we have to take 'em, and pay yuh what we figger is fair."

"Try it!" snapped Craig Tolson. "I was willing to be reasonable, yet one of your men tried to shoot me in the back. The way I feel now you can't buy my supplies at any price!"

"Then we'll take 'em!" roared Rockford. "Let's go, men!"

HIS words were the signal for battle. Instantly ranchers and waddies went into action. Rockford leaped forward and smashed a fist against Latigo Drake's chin that knocked the hatchet-

faced man down before he could draw a gun.

In moments fighting was in full blast all up and down the street. Men were pounding at each other with fists and gun-barrels—fighting grimly. Even the wagon men entered the fray.

Both cattlemen and Tolson's gunslicks seemed reluctant to start pouring lead into each other. They were willing to let it remain a battle royal, for the time being at least. Tolson and Rockford were fighting each other and they appeared evenly matched. Neither seemed to be winning.

Morgan found that his shooting the gun out of Joe Gary's hand had made him one of Tolson's crew in the eyes of the cattlemen. He was forced to knock down a waddy who tried to hit him over the head with a gun-butt.

"No shooting!" Craig Tolson called out, as he stepped back from the owner of the Running R. "Remember my orders!"

"Them's my orders, too!" shouted Rockford. "Lick the life out of 'em, boys, but don't start any lead flyin'!"

Those orders had hardly been given, however, before two men on the roof of the general store, and two others on top of the two-story hotel, armed with rifles, appeared and began picking off the milling cattlemen.

A waddy dropped as a bullet caught him in the heart. Almost instantly another fell, shot through the head That was a signal for every man to go for his gun. The hot, dusty street became a mad turmoil of shouting men and roaring lead.

Matt Rockford quickly realized that his forces were outnumbered. It was one thing to slug it out with the gunslicks and another to try and remain alive with guns blazing at you from every direction.

"Get yore hosses!" he shouted. "Tolson lied when he said there'd be no shootin'! They'll kill us all if we don't get out of here!"

Ranchers and cowpunchers raced to their horses and swung into saddles. Tolson was shouting to his men to stop firing, and most of them obeyed. Only the four men on the roofs did not cease trying to pick off the cattlemen.

Then three men came galloping into town, each man with a lawmen's badge pinned to his shirt.

"Here comes Sheriff Hunter and his deputies," shouted a mounting rancher. "A lot of good they'll do! Come on, men, let's ride."

The cattlemen headed out of town in a mad rush, cursing Craig Tolson as they went. Behind the ranchers rumbled the big ranch wagons, the drivers frantically lashing their teams as lead from the men on the roofs whistled around their heads.

"Stop it!" roared the sheriff. "What in blazes is goin' on around here?"

No one answered him. And as the last of the wagons disappeared in the dust, the town grew quiet. The men up on the roofs hastily faded from sight.

"Fools!" snapped Tolson, as he glared up at the empty roofs. "I ordered no shooting, then those men started using rifles and made me a liar! Who were they, anyway?"

"Yuh got me, Boss," said Latigo Drake, then glanced at Wayne Morgan. "Mebbe this feller Morgan could tell yuh. Could be he knows somethin' about those men bein' stationed up on them roofs."

"Why should I know?" demanded Morgan coldly. "I've never even been in this town before."

"Mebbe not." Latigo Drake turned away. "I ain't so shore of that!"

"Don't mind him, Morgan," Tolson said, as the gunslick moved out of earshot. "Latigo appears to resent the fact that you saved my life." The boss of Rocky Gulch smiled. "Professional jealousy, you might call it."

THE sheriff and his two deputies had left their horses at a hitching-rail and were asking questions. Only the six still forms sprawled along the street indicated how violent the gunbattle had been while it lasted.

"Want to talk to you later, Morgan," Tolson said as Sheriff Hunter and the deputies approached. "I've got to explain things to the sheriff now. It just might be I can use you."

"I'll look you up, Tolson," said Morgan. "Where can I find you?"

"I have a private office in the Eagle Hotel," said Tolson. "See me there in an hour or so."

Morgan strolled away. The sheriff and the two deputies hurried up the street to where Craig Tolson was calmly

waiting for them. Other men were carrying the bodies away. The score had been even, for the cattlemen had lost three waddies and three gunslicks had died.

"Begins to look like there might be work for the Masked Rider to do around here," Wayne Morgan mused thoughtfully. "Yeah, I'm right shore of it . . ."

An hour later he casually dropped into the sheriff's office. Sheriff Seth Hunter, a lean-framed old-timer with gray hair and a drooping gray mustache was alone there. He seemed tired and worried and eager to talk to someone.

"So yore name is Wayne Morgan," he said, as he motioned his dark-haired visitor to a chair. "Heard about you from Craig Tolson. He claims yoh saved his life when Joe Gary tried to shoot him in the back. What became of Gary anyway?"

"I believe he rode out of town just before the fight started," said Morgan. "At least I don't recollect seein' him around after things got goin' good."

"Mebbe I'm a fool to be talkin' to a stranger this way," said the old lawman. "But I'm in a tight and I need every friend I can get, Morgan. There's somethin' about yuh that makes me feel yuh ain't one of the hired gunnies Craig Tolson always has hanging around."

"I'm not," Morgan said quickly. "It looks to me like Tolson is runnin' things around here with a right high hand."

He said that deliberately, on the off chance of finding out if Seth Hunter happened to be a crooked lawman, under the thumb of the boss of Rocky Gulch.

The old sheriff nodded, and cursed under his breath.

"I know," he said. "Tolson shore is rulin' the roost. I've always prided myself on bein' honest and carrying out my law job the best I can, but lately things have been gettin' too tough for me."

"Might be a help if yuh was to tell me all yuh know." Morgan smiled. "I want yuh to figger on me as a friend, Sheriff."

"Thanks, Morgan, I shore appreciate that." Seth Hunter did seem grateful for the offer of friendship The old lawman's attitude struck Morgan as rather pitiful. 'Reckon it won't do no harm to tell yuh what I do know. I been kind of afraid to talk to Fred Norton and Wake Grant lately."

"Who are they?" asked Morgan.

"My two deputies," answered the sheriff. "Trouble is, I ain't shore I can trust 'em any longer. They been hangin' around Craig Tolson and Latigo Drake a little too much to suit me."

"Tolson runs this town all right," said Morgan. "He been here long?"

SHERIFF HUNTER shrugged casually. "Not so long," he said. "He came here a little over six months ago with plenty of cash and bought the hotel, the general store and the other places he now owns. This business of his raising the prices on the supplies the ranchers need to get along is somethin' new."

"Can't the cattlemen get supplies some other place?" asked Morgan, as he leaned back and rolled a quirly. "Tolson's askin' prices seem beyond all reason."

"Well," said Sheriff Hunter, "in the first place Rocky Gulch is the only town within a hundred miles of the six cattle spreads in Spruce Valley. Tolson's supplies come down the river by boats from Pine City, the railroad town a hundred miles up stream."

"What about rustlin'?" asked Morgan. "I heard a feller they called Jim Channing say he lost a trail herd last night."

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

"And ten of his Bar C waddies was killed," said Hunter. "That's where me and my deputies have been this mornin'—lookin' over the place where the herd was stole. But we didn't find nothin'—didn't think we would."

"The trail drives through the Bad Lands the only way the ranchers can get their herds to the railroad at Pine City?" demanded Morgan. "Seems right dangerous."

"It's the best way—that trail that skirts the edge of the Bad Lands," said the sheriff. "They ship some stock north by boat but it ain't proved practical."

"Why not?"

"Most of the river boats are small and only a few of 'em run up and down the Cheyenne in this section. But there's been a lot of trouble on the trail drives all right."

"Yuh think Craig Tolson has anything to do with the rustlin'?" asked Morgan. "Channing seemed to feel that way about it."

"I don't know." The old sheriff shook his head. "But I've got a suspicion that Tolson mebbe is a certain hombre I've heard a lot about but never seen."

"Who's that?" demanded Wayne Morgan.

"The Masked Rider," said Seth Hunter flatly. "I'm thinkin' mebbe the Black Band is led by that hombre!"

CHAPTER V

Man with a Star

WAYNE MORGAN looked at the old gray-haired lawman who made the amazing statement as if he couldn't believe his ears. That the Masked Rider might even be suspected of working with rustlers was startling to the man who knew more about the black-clad horseman than any other man alive.

"From what I've heard," Morgan said slowly, "the Masked Rider always works alone. I'm doubtin' he would be leadin' a band of rustlers like the Black Band."

"We won't argue about it," said Sheriff Hunter. "But me, I shore do believe the Masked Rider is leading the Black Band." He got to his feet and restlessly paced up and down the office. "I got a kinda feelin' I ain't goin' to live long, Morgan. It don't matter much—I'm gettin' old and tired. But if I did go suddenlike I'd like to know there was a good man handlin' the law around here."

Morgan was puzzled. He could not imagine what the old lawman was driving at.

"I been sizin' yuh up, Morgan," said Hunter. "And I'm askin' yuh to let me make yuh my chief deputy."

"Chief deputy!" exclaimed Morgan, in surprise. "But I—" He felt actually confused, a new experience in his hectic career.

"If somethin' should happen to me, yuh'd have the job of sheriff," said Hunter. "At least yuh'd be actin' sheriff until they picked another one legal-like. Yuh'd be the boss of them two deputies of mine." The old lawman grinned. "And they wouldn't like it."

"Yuh mean it?" demanded Morgan. "Yuh want to swear me in as chief deputy?"

"I shore do."

Hunter rummaged in his desk and drew out a badge. He pinned it on Morgan's shirt as the tall, dark-haired man stood up. The old sheriff made Morgan raise his right hand and be sworn in.

"There! Now yuh're my chief deputy," the lawman said, just as his two deputies stepped inside the door.

"Howdy, boys." A mocking note was in the sheriff's voice. "Want yuh to meet my new chief deputy—Wayne Morgan."

Morgan stood smiling at the two deputies as Hunter called them by name.

Fred Norton was a stout, bald-headed, middle-aged man with small, deep-set eyes. As he heard the sheriff, he looked like a baby about to cry.

Wake Grant was a thin, wiry little man, with hard, dark eyes. His constant weaving movements reminded Morgan of a snake preparing to strike. Grant scowled heavily at the sheriff.

"New chief deputy, uh?" The stout Norton laughed shrilly. "Looks like the sheriff shore talked yuh into somethin', Morgan."

"Yeah," said the skinny Grant. "What with the rustlin' and the trouble Tolson is havin' with the cattlemen about supplies we lawmen got a lot on our hands around here." He squinted hard at Mor-

gan and nodded. "Looks like yuh done the right thing, Seth. We can stand a good man sidin' us."

"Shore," exclaimed Fred Norton, his attitude jolly and friendly. "How about havin' a drink in Morgan's honor?"

"Good idea," said Sheriff Hunter. "There's a bottle of whisky and some glasses in the gun cabinet. Get 'em out, Fred."

Norton went to the gun cabinet as the sheriff seated himself at his battered desk with a sigh of relief. Evidently Hunter had expected more of an argument from Norton and Grant.

"Of course a chief deputy should be a man that's right fast on the draw," observed Wake Grant presently. "And with plenty of nerve."

He blinked as he found himself covered by a pair of six-guns that had seemed to leap into Wayne Morgan's hands.

"Like this?" Morgan asked quietly.

"Yeah, like that." Grant stared nervously at the two Colts aimed at him. "Yuh're chain lightnin' on the draw all right, Morgan. Put them guns away."

FRED NORTON turned from the gun cabinet and placed four glasses and a whisky bottle on the stained surface of the flat-topped desk, his back to Morgan and Grant.

The sheriff was watching the other two men.

"Here yuh are, gents!" The stout deputy poured three fingers of liquor into each glass. "Yore heart been botherin' yuh much lately, Seth?"

"Not enough to keep me from drinkin' now and then." The old lawman picked up his glass. "I been havin' a little trouble with my heart lately," he explained to Morgan. "Reckon age is creepin' up on me."

"Don't let it worry yuh none, Sheriff." Morgan thrust his guns back into the holsters and picked up his own drink. "Yuh'll live a long time yet."

"Shore yuh will, Seth." Wake Grant lifted his drink.

Holding his glass, Morgan strolled over to the open door, staring out at the dusty street.

Rocky Gulch seemed to be slumbering in the hot sunlight.

Behind him he heard a gasp. He whirled, his drink splashing to the doorstep unheeded. He was just in time to see Sheriff Hunter drop his empty glass and clutch at his chest.

"My heart," muttered the sheriff. "Looks—like this—is the finish. I—"

He shuddered and dropped forward across the desk, motionless. The two deputies rushed to him as Morgan leaped forward.

"His heart got him!" Fred Norton said, bending over the inert sheriff. "He's dead!"

"He always told us he'd go quick," Grant said solemnly, lowering his untasted drink. "Too bad. He was a good man."

"Whole thing startled me so," said Morgan, "I spilled my drink without even tastin' it."

"Have another," Norton said quickly. "Mebbe yuh need it more now."

Morgan shook his head. "It wouldn't seem right now." He looked at the two deputies and his voice grew hard. "Hunter's death makes me actin' sheriff around here, and we three are goin' to make folks respect the Law!"

"Shore," said Grant dryly, and at once changed the subject. "Craig Tolson wants to see yuh, Morgan."

Stout Fred Norton glanced at Morgan, then at the dead sheriff, and nodded solemnly.

"The Law will take care of things around here all right," he said. "That's plumb certain!"

Half an hour later Wayne Morgan paused in front of the closed door of Craig Tolson's private office on the ground floor of the Eagle Hotel.

He had left Norton and Grant to take care of the funeral arrangements for the dead sheriff. Old Hunter's wife had died ten years ago and he'd had no living relatives.

In answer to Morgan's knock the door of Tolson's office opened quickly. Latigo Drake stood there scowling at him. The hatchet-faced gunslick's eyes narrowed as he saw the badge on Morgan's blue flannel shirt.

"Figgered yuh might be a lawman when I first seen yuh," growled Drake. He had thought nothing of the kind, but was quick to convince himself. "Looks like I was right."

"Yuh guessed wrong," Morgan said casually. "I was made chief deputy by Sheriff Hunter just before he died."

DRAKE shook his head slowly. "Too bad. We heard about it—the sheriff dyin'—of a heart attack I mean News travels fast in this town."

"And folks die easy," said Morgan. "The boss around?"

"Right here, Morgan." Craig Tolson appeared and Drake stepped aside. "Run along now, Latigo. I want to talk to Morgan."

"All right." Drake spoke sullenly. "But don't go steppin' on my toes, Morgan, now that yuh're the Law. It just ain't healthy."

"Long as yuh don't bother me we won't tangle," promised Morgan.

Latigo Drake stepped out through the door as Morgan entered. Tolson closed and bolted the door from the inside. The boss of Rocky Gulch led the way into a private office and seated himself at an expensive walnut desk. There was an Oriental rug on the floor, two oil paintings on the wall and an air of luxury about the office that was surprising for a town like Rocky Gulch and a hotel like the Eagle.

"So Hunter swore you in as chief deputy." Tolson motioned Morgan to a comfortable chair. "That makes you acting sheriff now."

"It does," Morgan said quietly.

"Getting Hunter to make you chief deputy was a smart move, Morgan." Tolson looked thoughtful, then nodded. "Yes, I like that. I might arrange for you to hold the job of sheriff permanently"

Morgan sensed that Tolson considered him a gunman with brains, and that was the way he wanted the boss of the town to feel. It might be to his advantage, and in the long run to that of the cattlemen, if Craig Tolson considered him one of his men.

"Ain't so shore I want this job I've got for long," Morgan said. "What's there in it for me, Tolson?"

"Plenty, if you play your cards right," said Tolson.

"I like to know somethin' about the cards before I take a hand," Morgan said flatly.

"Only a fool tells a man much until he knows he can trust him, Morgan," Tolson said. "I never considered myself in that class."

"That's the way it stands then?" Morgan got to his feet. "Yuh don't figger on tellin' me any more?"

"Not now," said Tolson. "I want to see how you handle your job first, Sheriff." There was a mocking note in his tone. "I'm giving you free rein."

"That's big of yuh." Morgan's tone was equally taunting as he walked to the door and drew back the bolt.

Standing just inside the doorway he removed his Stetson, drew one of his guns and balanced the hat on the barrel. He thrust the Stetson outside the door at about the height of a man's head.

From the hall a gun roared, and a man cursed as he realized he had been tricked. Morgan flipped the hat off the gun-barrel and stepped out with his Colt ready. He heard the sound of running feet, but saw no one.

"Latigo Drake must have a jealous nature," Morgan complained. "That hombre plays any more childish tricks like that I'll have to down him."

"You're careless, Morgan," said Tolson's voice from behind him.

Morgan whirled to see Tolson standing there covering him with .38.

"Why?" Morgan demanded curtly, staring at the gun.

"To teach you not to trust anyone." Tolson thrust his gun back beneath his coat. "Not even me."

Wayne Morgan smiled grimly, dropped his own gun back into the holster, then picked up his hat and put it on.

"I'll remember that," he said.

Deliberately he again turned his back on Tolson as he stepped out through the door, closing it softly behind him. He did not see the glint of admiration in Craig Tolson's eyes.

"Good man, that," Tolson muttered. "But a little too sure of himself. He might prove dangerous."

CHAPTER VI

Two Masked Men

MORGAN found his roan still at the hitch-rail in front of the sheriff's office. He swung into saddle. The office was closed and he did not see the two deputies. Nor did he see Latigo Drake as he rode out of town.

He had decided to head back to the

BLUE HAWK

hide-out in the hope that Blue Hawk might be there with some information regarding where the rustlers had taken Jim Channing's herd.

As he rode he was puzzled. He felt that it was time for the Masked Rider to go into action, yet he could not quite decide on just how. If the Masked Rider appeared at any of the ranches except the Bar C, there was a good chance of his being shot at sight. Matt Rockford and the other ranchers might believe as had Sheriff Seth Hunter—that the black-clad horseman was the leader of the Black Band.

"I shore got myself into somethin'," he was thinking as he rode. "I'm the Law here, all sworn in legal-like—and *I'm* the Masked Rider." He grinned. "Reckon I ought to be out huntin' for myself."

He was anxious to talk to the ranchers individually, to Matt Rockford in particular, since the owner of the Running R was the leader of the cattlemen. Still Morgan felt that it would not be advisable to visit the ranchers in Spruce Valley in his present rôle either. They all thought him one of Craig Tolson's gunslicks, and they would be sure to resent his having been made chief deputy.

"Chances are they'll figger that Tolson is ruling the Law openly, with me actin' as sheriff," muttered Morgan, as he approached the hide-out.

To his disappointment Blue Hawk was not around, and there was no sign of the Indian having been there. Blue Hawk would have left some sign if he had returned and left again.

It dawned on Wayne Morgan then that he'd had no sleep the previous night, and nothing to eat. He chewed on a piece of dried jerky after stripping the kak and bridle off the roan. Then he got a drink of water from a nearby stream and stretched out on the soft grass to rest.

The warm silence of the afternoon lulled him to sleep. His last thought before he drifted off was that while it was only ten miles from Rocky Gulch to where the Bar C trail herd had been attacked, it was much farther than that to Spruce Valley. At least a good day's drive with a slow-moving trail herd.

Night had descended when Morgan awoke, and still Blue Hawk had not returned. But Wayne Morgan was not worried, for the Yaqui was able to take

care of himself.

"Reckon the Masked Rider will pay a visit to the Runnin' R tonight and see what happens," Morgan decided. "If I run into trouble it just can't be helped."

He saddled Midnight, donned the black Masked Rider rig and adjusted the mask across his eyes. It was too much trouble to bother with the black cloak so he left it in his saddle-roll. The black sombrero and mask, dark shirt and levis should be disguise enough. He had removed his distinctive leather chaps.

"Let's go, Midnight," he said as he swung into saddle.

The night was clear and Midnight's flashing hoofs ate up the miles toward Spruce Valley. The black stallion had rested all day and was eager to run.

IN two hours he reached what he decided must be Spruce Valley. It was a vast expanse of fertile rangeland, and he could easily understand how six good sized cattle spreads could be here without being too close to each other.

He rode cautiously with one hand close to a gun on his hip, for he did not know if he would be considered friend or foe by the cattlemen. Ears that had been trained to distinguish the night sounds and warm him of anything wrong were constantly alert.

When he caught sight of lights gleaming ahead he slowed Midnight to a walk and guided the stallion over soft ground in order to muffle the beat of the horse's hoofs as much as possible. Riding nearer, he saw that the lights were shining through the windows of a big ranchhouse.

He reached a gate some distance from the ranchhouse, and saw the Running R branded on the gate posts. He had reached Matt Rockford's spread far quicker than he had hoped.

Groundhitching Midnight in a cluster of trees, he advanced toward the ranchhouse on foot, swiftly and silently. Taking advanage of every shadowy spot the Masked Rider edged forward until he was crouched beneath an open window on the ground floor of the two-story ranchhouse.

He raised his head and peered in as he heard angry voices inside. The eyes that stared through the holes in the mask narrowed at the sight that met their gaze.

Matt Rockford stood beside an open safe in what was evidently the office of the owner of the Running R. Rockford's arms were extended high above his head and the bitter expression on his face seemed accentuated by the yellow glow of an oil lamp.

The rancher was glaring at a masked man who had Rockford covered with a gun. A young red-headed, freckled-faced waddy stood near the owner of the Running R with his hands also raised, his leather cuffs gleaming in the light.

"So this is more of Tolson's work!" Rockford sneered. "He's found out we ranchers got together this afternoon and pooled all the ready cash we had to send to Pine City and have supplies shipped to us by wagon train. And now he's sent yuh here to steal that money!"

"Tolson must be mighty shore of himself to just send one man," muttered the red-headed waddy. "Guess he figgers to get yuh in a tight all right, Boss."

"Never mind, Buck," snapped Rockford. "I'll take care of this. None of Tolson's masked killers is goin' to get that money away from me."

"You and Buck Allen are talkin' mighty big," drawled the man whose face was hidden by the bandanna mask, "I got the drop on yuh and I want that *dinero*. Hand it over quick or I'll put a bullet in yuh both!"

The Masked Rider grasped the sill and silently climbed in through the window. Buck Allen gave a startled gasp as he saw the black-clad man drop into the office. The red-headed waddy certainly was not a poker-faced individual.

"The Masked Rider!" he shouted, staring with popping eyes behind the bandanna-masked robber.

"Oh, shore," chortled the man holding the gun on him. "And probably he brought Little Red Ridin' Hood with him." He did not make any attempt to look behind him. "Yuh can't bluff me with an old trick like that, Allen."

THE Masked Rider's right-hand gun flashed out of the holster as he leaped forward. He brought the long barrel crashing down on the man in the bandanna mask with such force that it knocked the robber unconscious. The man dropped to the floor and sprawled there motionless.

"Yuh're the Masked Rider?" Rockford demanded dazedly, looking with

amazement at the black-clad man. "But we heard yuh're the leader of the Black Band! Why should yuh come to our rescue?"

"Careful, Boss," Buck Allen warned hurriedly, before the Masked Rider could speak. "There may be some trick to this. Might be that the feller this Masked Rider knocked out was just some lobo tryin' to get the money first." The red-headed waddy frowned. "It ain't like Tolson to send a boy to do a man's job."

"Yuh guessed it wrong, Allen—if that's yore name," declared the Masked Rider. "I came here to offer my help to the cattlemen. I don't want their money."

He thrust his gun back into holster. Matt Rockford slowly lowered his arms. The ranch owner seemed puzzled, but willing to hear what the Masked Rider had to say.

"Could be that my foreman here is a mite too suspicious," he said in a mild tone. "After all there ain't none of us certain that the Masked Rider *is* the leader of the Black Band."

"I'm not," said the Masked Rider with finality.

He leaned down and pulled the bandanna mask off the unconscious man. The face of Wake Grant was revealed! The wiry little deputy was the robber! The Masked Rider stood up with the red bandanna still in his hand.

"Got you!" shouted "Buck" Allen suddenly, his gun covering the black-clad man.

The Masked Rider leaped to one side like a frightened cat. His left hand flashed to his holster, while his right flung the bandanna at Allen's face. The cloth spread out as it landed on the Running R foreman's nose. Allen fired but his bullet went wild.

Before the foreman could get the bandanna off his face and try another shot the Masked Rider snatched the gun out of the red-headed man's hand and as he stood covering Allen and Rockford with his own Colt he heard the patter of running feet. The door of the office was flung open and a pretty brown-haired girl stood in the doorway.

"Dad!" she cried. "I heard a shot! Is—"

She broke off abruptly as she saw the black-clad man standing there covering her father and the Rocking R foreman. "Everything is all right, Miss Rockford," the Masked Rider said coolly. "This ain't as bad as it looks."

For an instant the girl stood stock still in the doorway. She was pretty and the house dress she wore accented her youthful slenderness. Her hazel eyes were wide with surprise, but gradually fear stole into them as she looked at the unconscious man lying on the floor.

"The Masked Rider is right, Sue," Rockford said hastily. "We been having a little trouble, but it ain't as bad as it might be."

"I nearly got him, but he was too fast for me," muttered the foreman bitterly, as he glared at the Masked Rider.

"Good thing he was," snapped Rockford. "Yuh always have been a little too quick on the trigger, Buck. Yuh might have downed a man who claims he wants to help us."

"I don't understand," cried Sue Rockford. "What's happened, Dad?"

"Why, it looks like Tolson sent one of the sheriff's deputies here to rob me of the money we cattlemen collected to buy supplies in Pine City," her father told her. "The Masked Rider showed up just in time to prevent Wake Grant—he's this unconscious hombre yuh see on the floor—from doin' it."

BUCK ALLEN shrugged, and spread his hands.

"If yuh really believe that I ain't arguin' no more, Boss. But I'm still figgerin' the Masked Rider's the leader of the Black Band."

"Told yuh before I have nothin' to do with that bunch of rustlers," said the Masked Rider. "I'm sayin' it again. I want to help the ranchers every way that I can. You've got to try and believe that, Rockford."

"Yuh could have put a bullet in Allen instead of snatchin' his gun out of his hand," Rockford said slowly. "I haven't forgot that. I'd like to believe the Masked Rider is on our side."

"The Masked Rider does help people who are in trouble, Dad," Sue insisted, as she stepped into the room. "Everyone doesn't believe the worst of him. When I was riding with Jim Channing this afternoon he told me how the Masked Rider had come to his aid when

the Bar C trail herd outfit was attacked last night."

"Jim Channing, eh?" said Buck Allen, a swift note of jealouy in his tone. "Well, if I'd been handlin' that trail herd last night I wouldn't have let all of my men get killed off the way Channing did. And he wasn't even wounded. Bet he ran!"

"He did not!" Sue's eyes flashed indignantly. "And just because you don't like Jim Channing, don't you dare accuse him of being a coward, Buck!"

"Channing put up a good fight," the Masked Rider cut in. "And so did the men with him. I was there and saw it."

On the floor, Wake Grant moaned and opened his eyes. Sue moved closer to the red-headed foreman. She was still angry.

"You heard what the Masked Rider said," she said defiantly. "So you'd better not say anything more about Jim."

None of them but the Masked Rider seemed to hear the muffled hoofbeats of a bunch of horses that were swiftly approaching the ranch. He sensed danger and suddenly grew tense.

Buck Allen backed away from Sue as though afraid of her and stumbled against a table. He knocked the oil lamp over and it fell to the floor. There was a clatter of glass as the chimney broke. And simultaneously with the crash a gun roared outside. Through the window the Masked Rider could see a group of horsemen milling around with guns in their hands.

"The Black Band!" shouted Rockford, as he also saw the masked men in the saddles. "They're attackin' the spread!"

CHAPTER VII

Fire and Gun Flame

IT SEEMED to be a lucky accident that Buck Allen had knocked that lamp over when he did. For now the ranch office was in darkness. The lamp had fallen behind the table which was covered by a big red cloth that extended far down the table legs, and no one noticed that the wick was still burning feebly.

Yanking out his guns the Masked Rider leaped to the open window. He fired, and saw one of the band outside reel back in leather, then clutch wildly at the horn as he slid out of the saddle. Again the Masked Rider's guns roared, sending lead tearing into the men in front of the ranchhouse.

"The table cover is on fire!" Sue cried abruptly.

The lamp wick's flame had ignited the cloth. In moments it was blazing, and the fire was spreading along the rug toward the wall.

Shouts from the Black Band announced that they saw the three men and the girl in the office revealed in the flickering light of the flames. Three men—because to his surprise the Masked Rider suddenly discovered that Wake Grant had evidently managed to make his escape in the darkness.

"We've got to put that fire out!" shouted Rockford. "If we don't the whole house will burn!"

He started toward the window nearest him, but ducked back as the masked band outside sent bullets rattling into the office. For the third time the Masked Rider fired at the horsemen milling around outside, then leaped to one side as there came an answering volley.

From the bunkhouse guns were roaring as the Running R cowhands took their part in the battle. The fire was steadily gaining. Smoke filled the room—it was hard to see or to breathe.

"Where can we get some water?" demanded the Masked Rider. "We've got to put that fire out pronto!"

"In the kitchen," said Sue, as she edged her way to the door through the smoke. "Come on, I'll show you the way!"

The Masked Rider followed her as Rockford and Allen each stood at the edge of a window firing at the men outside. The girl and the black-clad man had just reached the kitchen when two bandanna-masked men barged in through the back door with guns glinting in their hands. Both men shouted when they saw the man in the black mask and Sue Rockford.

"The Masked Rider!" one of them roared. "Down that jasper!"

He fired, but it was a dead man who pulled the trigger, for the Masked Rider had thrust Sue to one side and his own Colts were roaring. Both the bandanna-masked men went down as the Masked

Rider's bullet struck them.

"Lock the back door!" he told the girl. "Hurry!"

Sue ran to the door, slammed it shut in the face of another of the Black Band and thrust the bolt into place. The Masked Rider dropped his guns into his holsters, grabbed up a pail and began working the kitchen pump.

He filled the pail and dashed back to the office with it. He flung the water on the fire, then raced back for more.

Sue Rockford was clear-headed and quick-thinking. She had another pail and a dishpan filled and ready. The dishpan was big and held a lot of water.

"Take it!" Sue said. "I'll follow with the pail."

THEY hastened back to the office and dashed more water on the fire. The flames were losing headway fast. At the windows Matt Rockford and Buck Allen were still firing at the men outside.

Again the Masked Rider and the girl filled the dishpan and the pail and again dashed the water on the flames. The fire went completely out though smoke still lingered. What light there had been in the ranch office faded. Now the advantage was all to those in the ranch-house, for they were in darkness and not easy targets while the men outside were clearly revealed in the bright moonlight.

"Come on!" shouted the man who seemed to be leading the Black Band. "I hear a lot of hosses comin'! Let's get away from here before this gets too much for us."

The bandanna-masked men marshaled their forces and rode away in a body, heading toward the Bad Lands. Soon they had disappeared into the night. Silence claimed the Running R, a strange hush that seemed filled with the ghost echoes of roaring guns and the shouts of wounded and dying men.

"Them hombres!" Matt Rockford's voice cut through the blackness of the ranch office as he stood, a shadowy figure, near a window. "There is somebody comin'! I hear hosses."

"Could be more of 'em comin' this way," Buck Allen said. "Or some ranchers ridin' to help us."

The Masked Rider stood near the door with Sue Rockford close beside him. He was young enough and human enough to be conscious of the faint perfume of her hair, to realize that she was lovely, and had plenty of courage.

"I'll go see if the boys in the bunk-house made out all right," Allen said, as he turned from the window. "It must be cattlemen comin' or the Black Band wouldn't have lit out of here."

He passed the Masked Rider and Sue at the door. Without speaking they moved aside to let him go, for his presence had been disturbing. From the first the red-headed foreman had made trouble.

They heard his footsteps going across the hall and out onto the porch, then fading away. The girl sighed softly.

"Buck isn't like Jim Channing," she said. "He's too hot-headed and impulsive."

"Get a lamp from the other room, Sue," ordered Rockford. "I want to see how much damage the fire did here."

Sue went into the living room and returned with a lighted lamp. The hoof-beats grew louder, and then a group of horsemen loomed into view in the moonlight. Matt Rockford still stood at the window looking out.

"It's cattlemen all right," he said, relief in his voice. "Don't reckon there'll be any more trouble here tonight." He glanced around the office as the extent of the fire was revealed in the light of the lamp. "Not as bad as I thought."

"Rockford!" shouted a voice from outside. "This is Channing and the rest of us ranchers. Come out—we want to talk to you."

"Be right out!" called Rockford from the window. "Just a minute!"

He glanced at the Masked Rider who had stepped back into the shadows so that he could not be seen through the windows by the men outside. The Robin Hood outlaw wanted Rockford to explain his presence at the Running R before the rest of the cattlemen knew he was there.

"Jim," Sue murmured softly. "I—I'd like to see him too, Dad. Could you send him in here after you talk to those men?"

Rockford looked at his daughter. He was gaunt-faced in the lamplight, yet there was quiet strength in the owner of the Running R. He smiled and nodded.

'Sounds like yuh've made up yore mind whether it's Jim or Buck who

means the most to you, Sue," he said. "So it's Channing, eh?"

SUE nodded, her head held proudly and her eyes shining. Her hair was lovely in the light from the lamp.

"Yes, Dad," she said, "it's Jim. I'm sure of that now."

"Suits me," Rockford said, as he went to the door. "Jim is our kind of folks." He glanced over his shoulder at the Masked Rider. "Wait here," he said. "I'll tell the rest of the cattlemen about yuh."

He walked out through the hall onto the front porch. The Masked Rider heard the rumble of voices and occasionally a horse stamping restlessly or a bit chain jingling, but he could not distinguish any words.

Sue dropped down into a chair. She looked tired now that the excitement was all over. Her eyes wandered about the room, noting the damage caused by the fire.

"I'll have to get a new table cover," she said. "And Dad's old Morris chair looks like it's ruined." Her gaze turned to the black-clad figure in the shadows. The lamplight gleamed on the metal of his guns and the cartridges in his belt. "Do you like being a man of mystery?" she asked.

"Not always," said the Masked Rider, and at once spoke of something he considered more important. "Yore dad is a little careless. He left the safe standin' open—and I reckon the money he's been talkin' about is in there. Yuh better close it."

"It might be a temptation to a man who is said to be an outlaw," said Sue, without moving from her chair. "But I know that the Masked Rider can be trusted."

"Thanks." The Masked Rider smiled. "Trouble is there's lots of folks that don't agree with yuh on that, Miss Rockford."

There were footsteps and spurs jingling out in the hall. Jim Channing stepped into the ranch office. He smiled and his eyes lighted as he saw Sue. He had grown older, and more sure of himself than he had seemed the previous night at the trail camp. A man grows up quickly when he has stared death in the face.

"Rockford told the rest of the cattlemen about yuh," said Channing, his eyes seeking and finding the Masked Rider standing motionless in the shadows. "He told me to tell the Masked Rider to come out."

"Thanks," said the masked man. "I'll go."

As he moved toward the door Sue rose from her chair. Channing walked toward her and they no longer even noticed the black-clad man as he stepped out into the hall. In that moment they were living in a hazy world of their own and nothing else mattered.

In the hall the Masked Rider found Buck Allen. The foreman had just come in through the rear of the house. Evidently he had gone out through the kitchen and unlocked the back door, the Masked Rider thought for a moment, and then changed his mind. He distinctly remembered having heard Allen go out the front and across the porch when the foreman had gone to see about the men in the bunkhouse.

Then who had unlocked the back door that Sue had locked? Wake Grant? Had the thieving deputy been hidden in the house all of the time, and finally made his escape after the battle with the Black Band was over? The Masked Rider did not know, but he wondered about it.

He looked back into the office. Jim Channing was holding Sue close in his arms. The Masked Rider reached back and drew the office door shut.

"Rockford wants yuh out front, Allen," he said as the red-headed foreman drew closer. "Come on!"

BUCK ALLEN scowled and cast a quick look at the closed door, but he walked beside the Masked Rider as they went through the hall and out onto the porch.

"Here's the Masked Rider, men," said Rockford, and then he spoke to the foreman asking: "How many of

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our outfit did we lose, Buck?"

"Three men killed and four wounded," said Allen.

"I'm here in this part of the country to help you cattlemen all I can," said the Masked Rider, stepping forward and speaking in a voice loud enough to carry to all of the men who sat their saddles just beyond the porch. His voice was nothing like Wayne Morgan's either, for now his voice was disguised. "There may be some of yuh that still believe I might be leadin' the Black Band, but yuh're wrong about that."

"I've told them how yuh helped me this night," Rockford spoke up. "And Channing has told them about yore comin' to his aid last night. Reckon most of these men are right shore yuh're sidin' us now, Masked Rider."

"Good!" The Masked Rider sounded pleased. "Then the first thing all of yuh had better do is pick a few good men yuh can trust and send 'em to Pine City for the supplies yuh need as soon as yuh can. Tonight if possible."

"He's right," agreed one of the ranch owners. "The sooner we get the freight wagons headed this way with the food stuff we need, the better. I ain't goin' to let Craig Tolson force me to pay his high prices if I have to starve!"

"That goes for all of us!" declared Rockford. "I'm shore that Tolson sent the Black Band here tonight to raid this spread and clean me out because he knew I been holdin' the money for supplies. He didn't aim to let us use it if he could prevent it."

"Shore," Buck Allen said promptly. "First he sent that deputy to try and rob yuh, Boss, then he must have figgered that he better play safe and send the Black Band, too."

"Yuh've changed yore mind about things quick, Allen." The Masked Rider spoke so softly that only the foreman heard him. "I was supposed to be after that money, too."

"My mistake," said Allen, a bit sullenly. "Looks like I was wrong about that."

"Light and rest yore saddles, men!" called out Rockford. "Come on in the house and we'll plan how to outsmart Craig Tolson and the Black Band." There was excitement in his voice. "We've got the Masked Rider sidin' us now and that jasper is smart!"

CHAPTER VIII

Go Find Yourself

ANOTHER day—and the Masked Rider rode into Rocky Gulch in his rôle of Wayne Morgan. He established himself in the sheriff's office as acting head peace officer. He found Fred Norton there and the stout deputy seemed pleased with the world.

"Shore is a fine mornin'," Norton remarked affably. "With the sun shinin' and everything." Then he looked sad. "But I miss the sheriff a heap."

Morgan just nodded. In his estimation the stout deputy was one of the biggest hypocrites he had ever met. To his thinking Norton was not in the least grieved over Sheriff Seth Hunter's death.

"Where's Wake Grant?" Morgan asked.

He was in a difficult position. He knew that Grant had been at the Running R during the night and had tried to steal the money from Rockford the ranchers had gathered. But he could not admit it. Wayne Morgan supposedly knew nothing of what had happened at the ranch.

"I ain't seen Grant since late yesterday afternoon," Norton said, in answer to Morgan's question. "Guess he'll be showin' up after a while." The stout man chuckled. "I know a joke—"

"Tell it to me later, Norton," said Morgan. "I've got a lot of things on my mind this mornin'."

"All right." Norton sounded disappointed. "Yuh want me for anything? I'd like to go down street and talk to a feller."

"Go ahead," said Morgan. "I'll look for you if I need you."

Wayne Morgan breathed a sigh of relief as Norton left. There was something repulsive about the stout deputy. He seemed jolly and pleasant enough, but Morgan felt that, at heart, the man was a ruthless killer.

The cattlemen had planned carefully at the Running R the previous night. They had decided they would not even attempt to send another trail herd through the edge of the Bad Lands to

Pine City until the Black Band was cleaned out.

The Masked Rider had assured the ranchers that he would find the hide-out of the rustlers and lead them to the place as soon as possible. He was depending on Blue Hawk to locate the headquarters of the Black Band when he made the promise.

The fact that the Yaqui had not as yet returned from the Bad Lands was beginning to worry Morgan a little. Blue Hawk had been gone for two nights and a day now. He might have run into trouble.

The ranchers had sent six men to Pine City to get food supplies and bring them back by freight wagons. These men had left during the night, and by now they must be well on their way.

Morgan lifted a sheath of wanted dodgers out of a drawer of the sheriff's desk and looked them over. Some had pictures of the men who were wanted for various crimes; others were merely descriptions.

"Be nice if I could find Craig Tolson among the gents," thought Morgan, as he shuffled through the reward notices. "But I ain't run across a description that sounds like him."

He shoved the dodgers back into the drawer as he heard footsteps on the plank walk outside the office. He glanced up as Latigo Drake entered. The hatchet-faced gunman nodded as he saw Morgan sitting at the desk.

"Tolson wants to see yuh, Morgan," Drake said in a casual tone. "Told me to tell yuh to come to his office as soon as yuh could get there."

"All right." Morgan got to his feet. "I'll go see him."

DRAKE'S attitude seemed neutral now, so Morgan felt it wise to refrain from mentioning the incident of the man who had shot at him as he was leaving Tolson's office in the hotel the previous day. After all, he had not actually seen the man who had fired at him. He had only suspected it was Drake.

He followed Drake out of the office and closed and locked the door with the key that had been the sheriff's. Both deputies had keys of their own.

"Run into that Runnin' R waddy Joe Gary in the saloon last night," Drake remarked as the two men walked along the street. "He was talkin' mighty big about what he was goin' to do to you for shootin' his gun out of his hand."

"Thanks for warnin' me," said Morgan, and he looked at the gunslick questioningly. "But why?"

"I never drygulched a jasper in my life," declared Latigo Drake. "When I've downed a man it's been face to face every time. Kinda take pride in that."

"The same goes with me, Latigo," Morgan said.

They walked on for a little distance in silence. Then Drake observed:

"Joe Gary was still in town yesterday after the cattlemen left. Saw him goin' into the hotel after I left you in Tolson's office. He asked me if you was around and I told him where yuh was. His hand bled a lot for one that had just been gashed by a bullet, but he can still use it all right."

"Then it was Joe Gary and not you," Morgan said flatly, thinking of the man who had fired at him from the hall. "I might have known you wouldn't have been fooled by that hat on a gun-barrel trick."

"Not hardly." Latigo Drake did not smile. "Tolson told me about that. He thought I'd fired at yuh and gave me a tongue lashin'. He shore knows some of the fanciest words. I told him I didn't do it."

They reached the front of the hotel and Drake paused.

"Ain't yuh comin' in?" Morgan asked.

Drake shook his head. He seemed to have something on his mind.

"Them two deputies buried Sheriff Hunter mighty quick yesterday," he said, with a sudden change of subject. "Say—did Sheriff Hunter die from a heart attack?"

"He did not," said Morgan quietly. "Fred Norton put poison in the sheriff's drink of liquor."

Latigo Drake looked at Morgan with dawning respect in his hard eyes.

"Yuh've known that all the time and said nothing?" he demanded. "Man, when yuh let Hunter swear yuh in as chief deputy yuh shore picked yoreself a job!"

"I know it." Morgan nodded. "Rather yuh didn't say anything about the poison, even to Tolson, if yuh don't mind."

"Don't worry. I never was one to tend to another man's business." Drake

turned away.

Morgan went into the hotel. He went through the small lobby and into the hall that led to Tolson's suite.

He had learned that the boss of Rocky Gulch had a man who took charge of the general store for him; another who handled the business at the feed and grain store. One of his men ran the saloon, and another managed the hotel. But Craig Tolson supervised them all.

As Morgan paused at the closed door of Tolson's office, he heard voices inside. He knocked, and entered when Tolson called, "Come in!"

HE CLOSED the door behind him and glanced into the private office beyond the main office of the two-room suite. Tolson was seated at his desk, talking to Wake Grant.

"And just like I been tellin' yuh," the small wiry deputy was saying, his body weaving in the way characteristic of him, "I rode out to the Runnin' R last night to warn Rockford that the cattlemen would run into trouble with the law if they made any more tries to take over the stores in town."

"Come in and sit down, Morgan," called Tolson as he saw the tall, dark-haired, new lawman standing there. "You might find Grant's story interesting, too."

"Might," Morgan said dryly as he walked into the private office and sat down. He sat silently listening as the deputy started to talk again.

"I wasn't lookin' for any trouble at the Runnin' R," Wake Grant went on. "I went into the ranch office with Rockford and that foreman of his, Buck Allen. First thing I knew they was accusin' me of comin' there to steal some money the ranchers had turned over to Rockford, and that they was goin' to use to buy supplies."

"From me?" interrupted Tolson in surprise.

"No," said Grant. "They was goin' to send to Pine City and have the stuff brought back to Spruce Valley by freight wagons."

"So that's it," Tolson said grimly. "Then what happened, Grant?"

"When I seen that Rockford and Allen were tryin' to frame me I drew my gun and got the drop on 'em." The deputy was lying swiftly, making his story seem fairly convincing. "I would have got along all right if the Masked Rider hadn't climbed in through a window, sneaked up behind me and knocked me out."

"The Masked Rider!" exclaimed Tolson in sudden excitement. "You mean to say he *is* in this part of the country?"

"Ain't no doubt of it after what I seen last night," declared Grant positively. His eyes opened innocently. "But why should that surprise yuh, Tolson? Lots of folks believe the Masked Rider is the leader of the Black Band."

"Which is just what I want them to believe," Tolson said quickly. "What else happened at the ranch?"

Grant told of having escaped in the dark after Buck Allen had accidentally knocked over the lamp.

"And about that time the Black Band showed up and started raidin' the spread," said the wiry little deputy. "I wasn't fool enough to try and get out of the house then. I sneaked upstairs and hid till it was all over."

"So the Masked Rider is here," Tolson muttered thoughtfully, as though that were the only part of Grant's story he considered important. "I don't like that at all."

"Yuh'll like it less when yuh hear the rest of it," Wake Grant said, wagging his head. "When I got out of the house last night I hid in bushes close to the front porch. "I heard the Masked Rider talkin' and he plumb made Rockford and the rest of 'em believe he was sidin' 'em."

Craig Tolson got to his feet and paced angrily up and down. The boss of Rocky Gulch appeared to be working himself into a towering rage.

"The Masked Rider!" he muttered again. "And he's sold the ranchers the idea that he's working with them." Tolson cursed under his breath. "That won't do at all."

"Figgered yuh'd want to do somethin' about it, Boss," Wake Grant said, in a satisfied tone. "That's why I come and told yuh."

TOLSON paused in his pacing and looked at Wayne Morgan. The boss appeared to be thinking swiftly, and finally he nodded.

"That's it!" he said. "You're sheriff here now, Morgan, and the Masked

Rider is a wanted outlaw. And plenty of rewards have been offered for his capture."

"So I've heard," said Morgan, but the other two did not notice the dryness in his tone. "What about it, Tolson?"

"That's your job as sheriff," snapped Craig Tolson. "To get the Masked Rider dead or alive—preferably as a corpse!"

"Right big chore," Morgan said mildly. "I've heard that hombre is hard to catch up with. Besides he's mighty handy with a pair of six-guns."

"Afraid?" demanded Tolson scornfully.

"No." Morgan shook his head. "I'll try and do it, but it won't be easy."

This whole thing was decidedly amusing. Being ordered to go out and look for himself tickled the Robin Hood outlaw, but he kept his face straight.

"I'll help yuh, Sheriff," Wake Grant said promptly. "Me and Fred Norton both. But if the three of us get the Masked Rider it's understood we split the reward money, huh?"

"We'll argue about that when we do get him," said Morgan.

He foresaw difficulties. After all, Grant and Norton were his deputies and would be expected to help the sheriff find the Masked Rider. The dual rôle he was playing was growing more and more complicated as events moved on.

The outer door of the office opened and Latigo Drake entered. Tolson frowned.

"What is it, Latigo?" he demanded of his bodyguard.

"Rockford's daughter is waitin' out front of the hotel with the Runnin' R foreman," Drake explained. "Said she come to town to talk to you, Boss. Asked me to have yuh come out and see her."

"Why didn't you bring her in?" asked Tolson.

"She wouldn't come in," Drake said. "She'd rather talk to yuh outside, she said."

"All right." Tolson nodded. "I'll see her out there." He glanced at Morgan and Grant. "You better wait a few minutes before you leave here, Morgan. Might be better if Rockford's daughter and Allen didn't see me hobnobbing with the new sheriff."

"Somethin' to that," said Morgan, then asked, with a grin: "Rockford's daughter pretty?"

That was one way of keeping these men from suspecting that he knew exactly what Sue Rockford looked like.

"Very pretty," said Craig Tolson, and he looked at himself in a wall mirror before he left the private office. He added, as he reached the door: "But hardly the type who would be interested in you, Morgan."

CHAPTER IX

Blue Hawk Gets a Job

BLUE HAWK was saddle weary. For two nights and a day the Yaqui had trailed a small band of rustlers with the stolen Bar C herd as they headed steadily northward along the edge of the Bad Lands. He had paused for a few hours each night to rest, when the men with the herd bedded down the cattle, but started behind them again in the mornings.

As the dawn of the second day broke he was still steadily stalking the six rustlers with the herd. He was careful never to get close enough for them even to suspect they were being followed, or to risk their hearing the sound of his gray's hoof-beats.

"These men take herd far away," he muttered, as he rode on. "Guess Senor will worry that Blue Hawk has been gone so long. But he told me to find rustler hide-out, and I will."

He had discovered on the first night he had started his trailing that most of the Black Band had gone on their way after helping round up the stampeding cattle, leaving only those six men with the longhorns. He had considered following the larger group, but had decided that the most important thing was to learn where the stolen herd was being taken.

The chances were that this would prove to be the actual headquarters of the rustler band.

By morning, the six men with the herd had no longer bothered to hide their faces with bandanna masks. They used them as neckerchiefs in the usual manner of cowhands. In fact, the six rustlers acted more and more like regular cowhands as the day wore on. Blue Hawk

had managed to sneak close enough once or twice to see that they were a hard-faced bunch, but they handled the herd expertly.

At the end of the first day a chuck-wagon and a small cavvy of extra horses appeared from the northward and joined the trail herd outfit. Blue Hawk watched in surprise. These rustlers certainly did a complete job when they stole a herd.

That night the Yaqui was not far away when the herd was bedded down. With the coming of the second day he was now still following.

The trail herd swung away from the wild country of the edge of the Bad Lands and headed through a broad expanse of good rangeland. Finally the buildings of a big ranch loomed in the distance.

"So that's the hide-out!" Blue Hawk muttered. "But it looks just like any other ranch. All this I do not quite understand.

The trail herd was driven onto grazing ground and left to be guarded by two waddies who had ridden out from the ranch. The trail crew and the chuck-wagon went on to the spread. Everyone acted in the casual manner of cowhands at work.

Blue Hawk circled the ranch, careful always to keep out of sight. He saw no sign of men on guard, no hint that anyone on this spread expected trouble.

He finally decided upon a bold move. He circled to the north, then rode to the ranch from that direction. The trail herd crew had come from the west, so it would not look as if he had been following them.

He rode up to the corral just as some of the trail herd men finished unsaddling their horses, and sauntered out through the pole gate.

"Ride far from north before I find this place," Blue Hawk said to them, assuming the pose of a stolid wandering Indian. "Me find work here?"

"Yuh'll have to see the foreman about that," one of the men said carelessly. "I don't know if we need any more hands or not." He motioned to a big man who had just come out of the bunkhouse. "Hey, Dolan, here's an Indian lookin' for a job."

"That's the foreman," another waddy informed Blue Hawk. "Hash Dolan is his name. Talk to him." He walked away.

[*Turn page*]

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BLUE HAWK rode over to the foreman. "Hash," Dolan's face was expressionless as he watched the Yaqui.

"Lookin' for a job, eh?" he said. "We might be able to use you at that. We got a couple of other Indians in the outfit—good workers too."

"Me, I very good worker," Blue Hawk promptly declared. "Blue Hawk is strong. Know all about cattle and horses."

Hash Dolan grinned. "Yuh're hired, then. Forty a month. Good wages, ain't it?"

"Very good," Blue Hawk said eagerly. "Me start working right away. What I do first?"

"Nothin' right now," said Hash Dolan. "I'm in charge while the boss is away, so I'll give yuh yore orders later, Blue Hawk. Better turn yore hoss into the corral. He looks like he's done considerable travelin'."

"I get string of horses like other waddies?" asked the Yaqui. "My horse come a long way and he tired.

"Shore," said Dolan. "I'll see that yuh get some horses for yore string. Pick 'em out for yuh later."

"What place this?" asked Blue Hawk.

"Bar CRGL Connected," said the big foreman casually.

Blue Hawk blinked. Quite a lot of stolen stock could have their original brand worked over into something like the Bar CRGL Connected. For instance, it would only mean adding more letters to the Bar C brand on the steers of the stolen trail herd.

"You call it all that when you speak of this outfit?" asked Blue Hawk. "Hard to remember."

"No," said Dolan. "We just call it Bar Connected." The foreman turned away. "Unsaddle and put yore hoss in the corral."

Blue Hawk dismounted, unsaddled the gray and turned the horse into the corral. The Yaqui placed the saddle over his shoulder with bridle and saddle blanket draped across it and headed for the building he judged to be the harness shed.

His guess proved to be right, and he put his saddle on the rack inside. As he did, an Indian stepped in through the door. A quick glance told Blue Hawk that the other man was also Yaqui.

"The foreman just hire you?" demanded the other Indian in the Yaqui tongue.

"That is true, my brother," said Blue Hawk in the same language. "Why do you ask?"

"Running Deer came to warn you," said the other Indian.

"And Blue Hawk listens to your words of wisdom," said Blue Hawk. "Warn me of what, Running Deer?"

"That you were like a child who wanders into a wolf's den knowing not where it goes," said Running Deer. Then he lapsed into English. "You were a fool to come here, Blue Hawk?"

"Why?" asked Blue Hawk.

"Because everybody is welcome to join the outfit," said Running Deer. "But no one can ever leave."

"I don't understand." Blue Hawk frowned. "What do you mean?

"Always these men watch you as they watch each other," Running Deer told him soberly. "They never let you out of their sight—never. And those who try to get away are shot and killed. The big man, Hash Dolan, he is one without a soul. He kills, and he laughs at what he has done."

"But there are no guards," protested Blue Hawk. "The men I have seen act like the waddies on any ranch."

THE Indians had again lapsed into their own tongue in order to speak more freely.

"That is true," said Running Deer. "or many of them are part of a rustler band and are content with their jobs. But those who are not—there are at least ten like that here now—cannot escape. Running Deer is one of them."

"And it looks like Blue Hawk has become another," said the Yaqui companion of the Masked Rider. "Senor will not like this."

"Who is Senor?" asked Running Deer.

"A great man who is my friend and companion," said Blue Hawk proudly. "Running Deer would be surprised if I told you his name. But that I cannot reveal, for it is a deep secret. And one learns to keep such things hidden well."

"Some day perhaps you will tell me the name of this great man," said Running Deer. "But until Blue Hawk does I shall not ask again."

"Been looking for you, Runnin' Deer." Hash Dolan, the foreman, appeared at

the door of the harness shed. "You Indians stop chattering in that lingo I don't understand and get to work. Take Blue Hawk with you and finish diggin' them post-holes yuh started yesterday, Runnin' Deer."

"*Si* senor," said Running Deer, as he picked up a shovel and handed a pick to Blue Hawk. "Come, Blue Hawk, we go dig the holes."

After all the riding he had done Blue Hawk did not feel up to digging post-holes, but he knew it would not be wise to protest after what Running Deer had told him about the Bar Connected outfit. With the pick over his shoulder, he followed the other Indian out of the harness shed.

"It is not far," said Running Deer. "No need to saddle horses to ride to where we dig."

They walked away, padding along on moccasin-clad feet.

Hash Dolan stood watching them, and he frowned as he stared at the back of Blue Hawk.

"That new Indian strikes me as being too smart for his own good," muttered the foreman. "Wish I understood their language. I'd shore like to know what they was talkin' about." Dolan shrugged his massive shoulders. "Well, the boss give me my orders on how to handle unruly jaspers, and I aim to carry 'em out."

Half an hour later the two Indians were busy digging post-holes. It was hard work in the hot sunlight. Blue Hawk noticed that they were always in sight of some member of the Bar Connected outfit.

Running Deer had been right. It was far easier to get a job on this ranch than it would be to get away.

Blue Hawk could see that now. All the same he meant to try, as soon as it was night.

He had discovered the hide-out of the Black Band rustlers, and it was important that he get the information to the Masked Rider as quickly as he could. And while he felt that Running Deer could be trusted, Blue Hawk had not the slightest intention of telling the other Indian of his plans.

"I don't like this job much," Blue Hawk said, as he paused to rest for a moment.

"Nor do I," said Running Deer. "But it's better than death!"

CHAPTER X

Drygulcher on the Trail

THAT same morning that Blue Hawk found himself a member of the Bar Connected outfit, Wayne Morgan and Wake Grant waited in Tolson's private office. They were obeying the boss' orders not to be seen with him on the street where Tolson had gone to talk to Sue Rockford.

"Reckon we've hung around here long enough," Morgan said finally. "Now that Latigo has followed Tolson I guess we can slip out casual-like."

He walked to the door with the little deputy following close behind him. Morgan was wary, for he did not trust Wake Grant in the slightest degree. He wouldn't put it past the snakelike man to try to stick a knife in his back or put a bullet in him if he could.

When Morgan reached the hall he paused and closed the door of Tolson's suite as Grant stepped outside. Neither man spoke as they walked along the hall and into the lobby side by side. They seemed to have nothing in particular to talk about.

They nodded to the hotel clerk and walked on out on to the plank walk. In front of the hotel, Tolson was standing beside Sue Rockford's horse, talking to the girl. Buck Allen stood close by, holding the reins of his own horse. The freckle-faced, red-headed foreman seemed impatient, from the way he moved restlessly.

Morgan and Grant dropped down on a bench in front of the hotel. They appeared to be paying no attention to the trio in the street, but they could hear every word that was spoken.

"I appreciate your coming to town and pleading with me on behalf of the ranchers as you have done, Miss Rockford," Tolson was saying, as pompously as though he were making a speech. "I am anxious to avoid trouble as much as anyone, but with so few supplies on hand I've just had to raise my prices."

"Why?" demanded Buck Allen curtly. "Up to now yuh ain't mentioned any good reason for that, Tolson."

"It's simple," said Tolson. "I just haven't been able to get any more food-

stuff from Pine City for quite some time. I can't understand why the river boat hasn't even stopped here."

"The river boats never do stop unless they have special shipments of goods for Rocky Gulch," Sue Rockford said. "After all the river landing is five miles from town, and there's no reason for a boat stopping, except to unload freight."

"True," agreed Tolson. "But I ordered supplies some time ago, and they should have arrived before this."

"I saw a river boat pass as I was riding near the river yesterday," said Sue.

"Looks to me like yuh ain't even ordered any fresh supplies, just so's yuh could raise the prices on what yuh got on hand, Tolson!" Allen accused shortly.

"That's a lie!" snapped Craig Tolson in sudden anger. "I beg your pardon, Miss Rockford, but I resent being falsely accused by your foreman. I want to do all I can for the ranchers. Why, all of you have been my friends ever since I came to Rocky Gulch. You must believe that."

"I'd like to believe you, Mr. Tolson," said Sue. "That's why I rode into town to plead with you—and didn't tell my father where I was going." The girl frowned. "But it seems hopeless."

WAYNE MORGAN got to his feet as an idea struck him. He walked over to where Tolson stood talking to the girl. Both Sue and Buck Allen looked in surprise at the tall, dark-haired man with the law badge pinned to his shirt.

"Things ain't as hopeless as yuh think, Miss Rockford," Morgan said bluntly. "I'm actin' sheriff now and I aim to see that the Law is obeyed."

"Yes," Tolson said quickly, "Wayne Morgan here was made chief deputy by Seth Hunter, and now that the sheriff is dead Morgan automatically takes his place."

"One of yore gunslicks rulin' the Law," Allen said bitterly. "I might have known something like that would happen."

"But Morgan isn't one of my men," protested Tolson. "I had nothing to do with his being made chief deputy. I can assure you of that."

"I wish I could believe you," Sue repeated. "But I don't know what to think." She glanced at the foreman. "Come on, Buck. There's nothing more we can do here. Let's ride back to the ranch."

Allen swung into saddle. The girl and her father's foreman whirled their horses and rode away without looking back. Tolson and Morgan stood watching them.

"I almost had that girl and Allen believin' I'm an honest lawman," Morgan said thoughtfully, after a moment. "If there was only somethin' big I could do to prove it we'd have the cattlemen doin' whatever I said."

Craig Tolson also was thinking, swiftly. Then he smiled.

"Something big," he said. "You're right, Morgan. And I've got an idea. You are going to arrest me and put me in jail! The ranchers will think you are quite a man when they learn about that."

"Yuh're crazy!" protested Morgan. "As soon as I put you in jail the ranchers'll come to town and take all the stock yuh've got in the stores."

"Let them try it," Tolson said tightly. "I've made arrangements to get rid of all the stuff in the stores at my price. Spruce Valley cattlemen will never get it. You're going to arrest me and place me in jail this afternoon."

"Why?" asked Morgan. "It sounds risky to me."

"No." Tolson smiled. "I know exactly what I'm doing. After dark tonight I'm going to have my men load all the stuff in the stores in wagons and sneak it out of town to where I want it to go. I'll be in jail and won't know anything about it. If the ranchers do try and take over the stores after I'm in jail they'll find them empty."

"I still don't quite figger what yuh've got in mind," said Morgan.

"Why, tomorrow while I'm still in jail, I'll claim that the ranchers stole all my food supplies and sneaked them out of town," Craig Tolson said, with a satisfied smile. "Then I can insist on the cattlemen paying for stuff they haven't got—and I'll be collecting a good price for my supplies, too."

"Who did yuh sell the supplies to, anyway?" Morgan asked curiously.

"I'll tell you that later," said Tolson. "What do you think of the plan, Sheriff?"

"Might work," said Morgan, as Wake

Grant joined them. "And the cattlemen would think I'm a mighty good lawman when they hear about me arrestin' yuh." He frowned. "But I'm arrestin' you for what?"

"You might pretend you are holding me for a murder I committed down in Texas," said Tolson. "Yes, that would do nicely. Later you can discover it was a case of mistaken identity, and let me go free."

"Did yuh commit a murder in Texas, Boss?" Grant asked interestedly.

Tolson laughed. "If I had, do you think I'd be fool enough to admit it?"

"No, I reckon not," agreed the little deputy.

"Mebbe it would be a good idea if I rode out to the Runnin' R now and tried to make Rockford see I'm an honest lawman," Morgan said, consideringly. "I could act like I was right resentful of the way yuh been raisin' prices, Tolson."

"Fine!" said Tolson. "Get your horse and ride out there, Morgan. But be careful not to let any of them get a hint about my plans."

"I ain't that foolish," Morgan said shortly.

He walked away to get his roan from the hitch-rail in front of the sheriff's office. Swinging into saddle, he rode out of town, heading for Spruce Valley. It amused him that Wake Grant had not shown the slightest desire to go with him. Morgan wondered why Sue Rockford and Buck Allen had said nothing regarding the deputy having tried to steal the money from the Running R the previous night.

The roan was going at a gallop, for Morgan was anxious to catch up with Sue and the foreman before they got far away from town. He saw them a little distance ahead of him as his horse swung around a bend in the winding road.

Allen glanced back over his shoulder as he heard the rapid hoof-beats behind him. He said something to Sue and she also looked back. Their horses were going at a walk and they did not increase their pace—nor did they halt when they saw who was behind them.

"Howdy, folks," Morgan greeted, as he reached them and slowed his horse beside the girl's mount. Sue, he thought, was as attractive in riding clothes as she had been in the dress she had worn last night. "Mind if I ride a ways with yuh?"

"I guess we have no serious objections, Sheriff," said Sue. "It might be interesting to learn the Law's opinion of what is going on around here when Craig Tolson isn't present."

"Strikes me that Tolson has been actin' right high-handed," Morgan admitted. "That business of his raising prices the way he is doin' strikes me as nothin' but pure greed."

"Strange way for one of Tolson's crew to talk," Allen said sourly. He seemed puzzled by the new sheriff's attitude.

"I'm not one of Tolson's men—I told yuh that," said Morgan. "And if I can get the ranchers to believe that mebbe we'll get somewheres." He frowned thoughtfully. "I've seen Tolson somewheres before, but I just can't remember where. Might have been down in Texas."

"Texas, eh?" Allen shrugged. "I've been there—right big place. Yuh can't remember anything about seein' Tolson before, yuh say, Morgan?"

The road was wandering through a stretch of rocky country. Huge boulders and thick brush lined it on either side. Wayne Morgan suddenly had a presentiment of danger lurking somewhere ahead. He rode warily, his hand close to the butt of the gun on his right hip. Yet his tone was casual as he answered the foreman's question.

"No, I can't quite remember about Tolson," he said. "Seems to me that wasn't his name, either—but he had been mixed up in somethin' crooked."

Actually he knew nothing about the past of the boss of Rocky Gulch and could not recall ever having seen the man before. But he was deliberately building up a case against Tolson so that it would be convincing when he did place Tolson under arrest.

"Crooked work," said Sue. "I've never liked him or trusted that man."

"Same way I feel about Jim Ghanning," Allen declared.

"Buck!" Sue's eyes flashed as she glanced at the foreman. "Jim and I are engaged! I won't have you saying nasty things about him. Particularly when he isn't here to defend himself. He left with the men who went to Pine City last night, and you know it."

"Might be he won't get back." Allen's voice sounded a bit ominous.

"What do you mean?" There was a note of fear in Sue's own voice.

"If Tolson's as smart as I figger he'll never let them freight wagons with the supplies get through to Spruce Valley, Buck Allen said flatly. "Tolson's no fool."

MORGAN was riding beside Allen, and for a moment the foreman's bay and the roan surged ahead of the girl's little mare. Morgan abruptly swerved his mount as he caught the glint of sunlight on metal back in among the boulders at the side of the road. As a gun roared, the roan crashed into the bay horse, knocking it to one side.

The bullet whistled between Morgan and Allen. There was no way of telling which man the drygulcher had tried to kill. Morgan's gun flashed up and he blazed away at the drygulcher. The man behind the rock dropped as a bullet got him in the forehead.

"Who in blazes!" snapped Allen, as he snatched out his own gun. Then he saw what had happened. "Looks like yuh got him all right, Morgan. Good shootin'."

Sue rode up, as cool and self-possessed as she had been in last night's emergency. She held out her hand for the reins as Morgan swung out of saddle. She held his roan as he went back in among the rocks and examined the dead man.

"It's Joe Gary," he called out. "One of yore outfit, ain't he?"

"Joe Gary?" exclaimed Allen in surprise. "Now why should he try to drygulch us?"

"Mebbe he didn't like yuh for some reason, Allen," Morgan suggested, as he stepped out from behind the rocks, and dropped his gun back into leather. "That's the only way I can figger it."

He was sure he was the one Joe Gary had been trying to drygulch, but did not intend to admit that. It might be to his advantage if Buck Allen thought the new acting sheriff had saved his life.

"Looks like yuh kept me from stoppin' a bullet by movin' fast like yuh done, Morgan," the red-headed foreman declared. "If yuh hadn't bumped yore hoss into mine like yuh done I might be dead now."

"That's true, Buck," said Sue. She handed Morgan his reins and he swung into the saddle. "The more I see of Sheriff Morgan the more I'm inclined to believe he's an honest lawman."

"Me, too," said Buck Allen, but he didn't seem as pleased as he might have been. "It shore looks that way."

CHAPTER XI

Captives' Revolt

NIGHT fell, and Blue Hawk found that he had been ordered into a bunkhouse on the Bar Connected where the prisoners slept. There were ten other men in the place besides the Yaqui. Running Deer was one of them.

To Blue Hawk's surprise some of the men who he had thought were regular members of the rustler outfit turned out to be prisoners. During the day they had been working around the ranch like regular cowhands, but now as the Yaqui thought back he realized there always had been one of the hard-faced rustlers close by.

A good meal had been served in the cook shack, and the conversation at table had been general and casual. Though the Yaqui had noticed that some men seemed more taciturn than others, it now dawned on him that it had been because they were, in reality prisoners.

"Why you all stay here if you don't want to?" Blue Hawk asked when he was alone with the other captives in the bunkhouse. "Maybe we try escape, eh?"

"Shut up, Blue Hawk," a middle-aged waddy said wearily. "There's always somebody listenin' outside. It'll be tough for us if they hear us talkin' about tryin' to high-tail."

"We've thought of it plenty times," another prisoner said in a whisper. "We all want to get out of here—but anybody who's tried has got a bullet in his back."

"Why you not leave when you are riding to steal the cattle?" asked Blue Hawk. "Could be done then, maybe."

"Not a chance," muttered the middle-aged waddy. His name was Carson. "They never take any of us with 'em when they are stealin' cattle. We just work here on the ranch all of the time."

"And the door of this bunkhouse is

barred from the outside at night," whispered the other man who had spoken. "The windows are too narrer for a man to get through. They keep us plumb trapped."

"Keep still," growled Carson. "We've said enough. Somebody might hear us."

The men lapsed into silence. Blue Hawk stretched out on his bunk and sprawled there, thinking. The Yaqui had no intention of remaining a prisoner on this ranch any longer than he could help. He had to think of some good trick to play in getting away.

"Dolan usually shows up around eight, nights to check up on us—make shore we're all here," whispered one of the men. "He don't take any chances though. Has a bunch of his men with him, all armed heavily. And we haven't got any guns."

Blue Hawk did not have a gun either. But his sheath knife was still in the case at his belt. The wide crimson sash he wore around his waist had hidden the weapon. If he could only get close enough to Hash Dolan to use that knife the Yaqui believed he might get free.

"Here comes Dolan," whispered Carson.

The bars on the outside of the bunkhouse door were being lifted. The door opened and the giant foreman strode in with four heavily armed gunslicks following him. They stood near the door as Dolan walked from bunk to bunk, looking at each of the prisoners.

"Just want to see that you hombres are all settled down for the night," Dolan growled. "Sort of tuck yuh in yore beds, yuh might say."

None of the prisoners spoke. Blue Hawk moaned softly.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Dolan, as he walked over to the Yaqui's bunk. "Yuh sick?"

"Bad pain in stomach," moaned Blue Hawk. "Maybe eat too much."

DOLAN leaned over the Yaqui's bunk. The foreman's body hid Blue Hawk's head and shoulders from the four gunslicks at the door. The Yaqui caught Dolan by the shirt front with his left hand while his right held the point of his knife at the foreman's throat.

"Tell your men to go away or I'll kill!" Blue Hawk spoke so softly that only Dolan heard him. "Do it quick."

"Everything is all right, boys," said Dolan, fear in his eyes as the knife blade pricked his flesh. "Yuh can leave now. I'll be with yuh in a few minutes."

His tone seemed casual enough. The four gunslicks obeyed without question. They moved through the open door and disappeared into the night.

Blue Hawk's left hand released its grip on the big foreman's shirt. The copper-hued fingers flashed down and grabbed Dolan's gun out of the holster. Before the big man could move Blue Hawk brought the gun barrel down on Dolan's head. The foreman slid to the floor unconscious.

"Quick, all of you!" called Blue Hawk as he leaped to his feet, gun in one hand and knife in the other. "Put out that lamp!"

Carson blew out the flame of the oil lamp, and in an instant the bunkhouse was in darkness. Blue Hawk leaped to the open door, and stood beside it, waiting.

"Shout for help!" he ordered. "They'll think it is Dolan, and come on the run!"

"Help!" shouted Carson, trying to sound as much like Dolan as he could. "Pronto! These hombres are tryin' to kill me!"

From outside came curses and excited shouts as the four gunslicks heard the cry of alarm. The rest of the Bar Connected outfit, in the main bunkhouse, were too far away to hear what was going on.

The four rustlers rushed in, their guns in their hands and ready. That was a fatal mistake, for lightning seemed to strike them from all sides. Blue Hawk knocked one man out with his gun-barrel. Another went down from a blow from a chair that Carson had grabbed up. Other prisoners landed on the other two men and dragged them to the floor.

"I got a gun!" called a low voice in the darkness, as one of the prisoners grabbed a Colt from an unconscious man's holster. "Shore feels good to grip an iron again."

"I've got one, too!" another man said jubilantly. "Somebody get some rope and we'll tie these hombres up."

Blue Hawk drew the door closed from the outside and stood there on guard while someone lighted the lamp. The prisoners quickly tied and gagged Hash

Dolan and the four rustlers, and dumped them in bunks.

Five prisoners buckled on the gunbelts they had taken from the unconscious men. Some of the conquered men had been wearing two guns and these were passed out to men eager to escape. In all, eight prisoners were now armed.

"We go now!" called Running Deer, flourishing the gun in his hand. He blew out the lamp and slipped to the door, with the others following. "Blue Hawk smart, like all my people."

Blue Hawk, on guard outside, had seen no one. The ranch was quiet. The prisoners closed the bunkhouse door and put the bars back in place. To the rest of the Bar Connected outfit it would look as if the prisoners were sleeping inside as usual.

"Get saddles and rigging," ordered Blue Hawk. "We'll steal horses from the corral and get away quick."

"Steal, my eye," snapped Carson. "My own hoss is in the cavvy and I aim to get him. Reckon that goes for all the rest of yuh. Yuh came here on yore own hosses."

THEY got their rigging out of the harness shed, and stole to the corral. Horses were roped and saddled swiftly, and men swung into leather. Then from the main bunkhouse came a shout and the roar of a gun. Somebody had spotted the men at the corral and had fired his gun as a signal of danger.

"Drive the rest of the hosses out!" shouted Carson. "They can't foller without hosses."

Swiftly the rest of the cavvy was driven out of the corral. Guns roared and flames stabbed the night as rustlers pounded toward the corral. The prisoners returned the fire as they went tearing out of the corral behind the wildly running cavvy.

They were careful to keep the riderless horses bunched as much as possible. In a few minutes they had put considerable distance between themselves and the rustler outfit. And the Bar Connected crew could not possibly follow them on foot.

Within an hour Blue Hawk and the ten escaping men were headed toward the Bad Lands, still driving the cavvy before them. They slowed their pace, but moved steadily onward.

Back in a ravine they camped for the rest of the night, and made their plans. Blue Hawk spoke swiftly and the men chuckled when the Yaqui had finished.

"Runnin' Deer was right when he said yuh was smart, Blue Hawk," Lem Carson complimented. "That idea of us stealin' all the Bar Connected stock and drivin' it back to the ranchers them cows was rustled from shore is somethin'!"

"And as long as Hash Dolan and his outfit ain't got any hosses they ain't got much chance of stoppin' us," agreed another former prisoner. "Looks like we might be able to get away with it. No harm in tryin', anyway."

With the coming of dawn eleven men, counting Blue Hawk, went to work. They moved swiftly, herding together all the Bar CRGL Connected cattle they found grazing all over the range and driving them to a box-canyon back in the hills.

By late afternoon they had rounded up over a thousand head. The herd had become a big one for eleven men to handle, but they were doing a good job of it. They were all experienced cowhands, and showed it. Even Blue Hawk and Running Deer were good at the job.

From time to time they had seen the rustler outfit in the distance, but all of them had been on foot. The prisoners had taken every horse on the ranch when they made their escape.

Once they had the cattle safely in the box-canyon, four men were left on guard. Blue Hawk and the rest headed for where they had left the Bar Connected cavvy in a quickly improvised rope corral.

Here a shock greeted them. The horses had broken through the ropes and got away. There was not one of them in sight.

"Gone!" muttered Lem Carson. "And the whole bunch of 'em will probably head for the home corral. Them Bar Connected sidewinders will saddle up and be on our trail pronto."

"But we don't want to lose that big herd we stole!" protested Blue Hawk. "All of you go back to box-canyon. Hide in the rocks and fight while I ride for help."

"Help from who?" demanded Carson.

"The Masked Rider," said Blue Hawk proudly. "He is my friend."

"Leaping horntoads!" exclaimed Car-

son. "Yuh know where to find the Masked Rider? Is that true, Blue Hawk?"

"It is," said the Yaqui. "Only trouble he is near a town called Rocky Gulch—two nights' and a day's ride from here."

"By the cattle trail," said Carson. "But Rocky Gulch ain't more'n a day's ride from here if yuh head straight south and don't bother to foller that windin' trail."

"Good!" Blue Hawk said eagerly. "I go now then and try and be back with the Masked Rider and maybe more men by tomorrow night. I ride all night tonight—get to Rocky Gulch quick."

He headed straight southward, his fleet gray going at a gallop. Once he glanced back and waved as he saw the former prisoners of the rustlers heading for the box-canyon to defend the big herd with their lives until help arrived. Blue Hawk was proud of them. The Masked Rider would be also—and would prove it.

CHAPTER XII

Three Prisoners

ROCKY GULCH slumbered in the hot sunlight of mid-afternoon. In front of the Eagle Hotel Craig Tolson stood on the dusty plank walk with the air of a man who was quietly content with the world. That he would be arrested and placed in jail before night did not seem to bother the boss of the town in the least.

Latigo Drake was lounging on the bench in front of the hotel. The hatchet-faced gunslick did not seem quite as pleased with the world as was Tolson. Drake wasn't sure how many Rocky Gulch men could be trusted to side with Tolson, once they found the boss in trouble. Only ten of them besides Latigo who were Tolson's hired gunslicks. The rest of the local men had worked with Tolson merely when it suited them.

In the sheriff's office, Wayne Morgan was studying the wanted dodgers again. He smiled grimly as he read the description of one man, and put the reward notice aside.

"Find somebody yuh know?" Fred Norton asked. The stout deputy sat in a chair idly cleaning his nails with a jackknife, but he had been narrowly watching Morgan.

"In a way," said the new lawman. "Yuh ever hear of an hombre called Frisco Steve Lang?"

"Only on a reward poster." Norton shrugged. "Seems to me he was the leader of a bunch of train robbers, wasn't he?"

Morgan nodded. "Lang and his men held up a train about a year ago and got away with twenty thousand dollars in cash."

"Which is a lot of *dinero,*" put in Wake Grant, a greedy look in his hard eyes. The little deputy was sitting in the doorway looking out at the street. "They ever catch this Frisco Steve Lang?"

"Don't reckon so," said Morgan. "This reward notice for him looks right new." He glanced at the wanted dodger. "Mm—Diamond shaped scar on left wrist,'" he read. "The rest of the description might fit ten jaspers."

"How much they offerin' for his capture?" asked Grant.

"Two thousand," said Morgan. "Dead or alive."

"Tolson had a lot of cash when he first come to this town," Norton observed thoughtfully. "Nobody had ever heard of him before either. Wonder where he got his money?"

"Yuh sound like yuh think Tolson might be Frisco Steve Lang." Morgan folded the reward notice and stuck it in his pocket. "The boss won't like yuh havin' ideas like that."

"Cattlemen are ridin' into town," remarked Grant, staring southward along the street. "Reckon they're goin' to try just once more to talk Tolson into sellin' 'em supplies."

"Why should they, when they've sent to Pine City for stuff?" demanded Norton.

"Tolson ain't supposed to know that." Wake Grant glanced over his shoulder. "Reckon this is a good time for yuh to make yore big play and arrest Tolson, Morgan?"

"Looks like it." Morgan rose from the desk. "You two better stay here. It'll look better if I handle this alone. Them cattlemen know yuh're Tolson's man, but

they ain't shore about me."

"Neither am I," said Grant. He yawned and did not move from his seat in the doorway as Morgan stepped past him. "Two thousand dollars, eh?" He said thinking of "Frisco Steve" Lang. "I'd do a lot for that much *dinero*."

WHEN Morgan walked down the street the ranch owners had halted their horses in front of the hotel and were arguing with Tolson. But the air was not as tense as it had been the first time the cattlemen had come to town in a body.

"That's the way it stands, Rockford," Tolson was saying. "I just can't lower my prices. I've closed my stores and I'm going to keep them shut until we get this thing settled."

"That's yore last word?" demanded Rockford. He seemed strangely calm. "Yuh won't change yore mind about them prices?"

"No," said Tolson. "That's final.

"Lookin' for yuh, Tolson." Morgan walked up to the boss of Rocky Gulch, and the acting sheriff had his hand on the butt of his gun. "I'm arrestin' yuh on a charge of murder."

"Murder!" gasped Tolson. "Why, you're crazy, Sheriff!"

"No, I'm not," Morgan said coldly. "I just been lookin' over some reward dodgers, and I find yuh're wanted on a murder charge down in Texas."

The cattlemen sat their saddles, listening in amazement. That Morgan would boldly attempt to arrest Tolson in the boss' own town was startling.

"You can't prove I'm the man who's wanted!" protested Tolson. He was doing a masterful job of acting. "I won't let you arrest me, Morgan!"

"Yuh're under arrest," Morgan said sharply.

For an instant his gaze swept over the cattlemen. He saw Buck Allen, who sat in his saddle next to Rockford, grow tense.

"Look out, Morgan—behind yuh!" shouted Allen, as he slapped down for his own gun. "Behind you! Latigo Drake!"

The foreman's gun roared. Morgan whirled just in time to see Drake pitch face downward on the plank walk, as Buck Allen's bullet got the hatchet-faced gunslick in the chest. Latigo had one gun half-drawn from its holster.

He rolled over and stared up at Morgan who moved closer to him. Drake was dying, and he knew it.

"Told yuh—never shot a man in the back—or drygulched one," he choked. "Still sayin' it—now." He shuddered and closed his eyes.

Morgan spun around, his gun covering Tolson. There was a hard glint in Morgan's eyes.

"When one of yore gunslicks tries to kill me for sayin' so, I know yuh're the man I want, Tolson," Morgan said grimly. "Come on—I'm takin' yuh to jail and holdin' yuh there till Texas Law can send for yuh."

Craig Tolson looked at the still form of Latigo Drake and shuddered. This business of his being placed under arrest had become far too real. He mopped his face with a white handkerchief.

His men in the town had their orders not to interfere with the fake arrest, but all up and down the street now they were watching uncertainly. No one had warned them that Drake might be killed, for neither Tolson nor Morgan had expected that to happen.

"Always so blasted impulsive," muttered Rockford, glaring at Buck Allen. The red-headed foreman was shoving his gun back into holster. "I didn't see Drake make any move to draw until yuh shouted, Buck."

"He did," Allen insisted sullenly. "He was goin' to shoot Sheriff Morgan in the back." He whirled his horse and started to ride away. "I'm sick of the way yuh're always bossin' me around, Rockford. I'm quittin' the outfit right now!"

"Suits me," called Rockford. "I'll give yuh yore pay when I get back to the ranch."

BUCK ALLEN did not answer or look back as he rode along the street and soon disappeared in the distance.

Morgan grabbed Tolson and led him to the jail next to the sheriff's office. Tolson went without much protest for he was anxious to get the whole thing over. And he knew he could not admit his arrest was a fake in front of the cattlemen.

"Never expected that Latigo would be killed," Tolson said in a low tone when

he was out of earshot of the ranchers. "I don't like that, Morgan."

"Neither do I." There was regret in Morgan's tone. "All in all, Latigo was quite a man."

At the sheriff's office, the two deputies joined them. Grant and Norton seemed pleased with the way things were going and each held gun in his hand, pointed at Tolson.

"Overdoing it a little aren't you, boys?" asked Tolson, with a nod at the guns. "I'm not resisting arrest. You don't need those guns."

"We ain't takin' any chances," declared Norton. "From what we've heard Frisco Steve Lang is a right dangerous character—that bein' you, Tolson—and we aim to collect that two thousand dollars reward!"

"Frisco Steve Lang!" exclaimed Tolson. "Who is he?"

"Just the feller yuh used to be when yuh was bossin' a gang of train robbers," drawled Wake Grant. "Yuh can't fool us, Tolson."

The two deputies grabbed Tolson and hurried him into the jail. Grant unlocked the door of a cell and thrust the boss of Rocky Gulch inside after snatching Tolson's gun. The little deputy locked the door of the cell.

"Unlock the door of the next cell," Morgan said quietly.

The two deputies turned to find the acting sheriff covering them with his guns. Norton and Grant glared at him wildly.

"What's the idea?" demanded Fred Norton weakly.

"Drop yore guns," commanded Morgan. "And be quick about it. If yuh don't, I'll shoot."

The two deputies dropped their guns with a clatter.

"Tolson's gun, too," ordered Morgan. "Pronto, Grant!"

Wake Grant let Tolson's .38 drop. The boss of Rocky Gulch watched through the bars in startled amazement.

Morgan forced Norton to unlock the next cell, ordered the stout deputy to step inside and toss him the keys. Norton did, and Grant followed the fat man inside at Morgan's command.

"Have you gone completely insane, Morgan?" demanded Tolson.

"No." Morgan locked the door of the cell with the deputies inside. "I'm placin' Norton and Grant under arrest on a charge of murder."

"We didn't murder anyone!" protested Norton.

"Oh, yes, yuh did," Morgan said tightly. "Yuh killed Sheriff Seth Hunter by puttin' poison in his drink of likker."

"And I'd thought yuh'd think it was funny!" wailed Norton. "That was the joke I been tryin' to tell yuh."

"That's where all three of yuh made a mistake," Morgan said grimly. "I promised Sheriff Hunter I'd be an honest lawman. He figgered I would be—and I'm goin' to be, long as I'm actin' sheriff."

"I'll have you fired!' roared Tolson. "You can't get away with this, Morgan."

"Oh, yes, I can," Wayne Morgan said, with cool emphasis. "Them cattlemen believe yuh're a murderer—and yuh'll have a hard time, Tolson, makin' 'em believe yuh're not!"

CHAPTER XIII

A Plan Goes Wrong

EVENTS were transpiring swiftly in Rocky Gulch. With the coming of night Craig Tolson and the two deputies were still in jail and Morgan had pressed two waddies from one of the cattle spreads into service of the Law. These men, guarding the prisoners, had orders not to let anyone talk to Tolson, Norton and Grant.

As it grew later, big wagons drew up behind the general store and the feed and grain store. The orders of the boss of Rocky Gulch, issued before he had been arrested, were being carried out.

Tolson's trusted crew worked swiftly, cleaning out both stores, loading all the food stuff in them onto the wagons. It was done without anyone strolling along the street knowing it was happening, for the fronts of both stores were dark and the window shades had been drawn.

"Guess that's about all, men," declared a gunslick named Bill Jennings, a short, stocky man who never smiled. He had been bossing the job. Latigo Drake was to have been in charge, but with him dead, Jennings had taken his place. "You

wagon drivers have yore orders. Head straight north till yuh reach the Bar Connected Ranch. The foreman of that outfit who bought all the stuff has paid for it already, so yuh ain't supposed to collect any money."

"But what if we run into trouble, Jennings?" asked a driver as he climbed up on a wagon seat and picked up the lines.

"Yuh won't," said Jennings. "Nobody knows about this. Besides, ten of us are ridin' with yuh to see that the wagons get through. Tolson's orders."

"Yeah, but he's in jail," objected the wagon driver.

"Don't worry about that," Jennings rumbled. "If Tolson didn't want to be in jail he wouldn't be there. He ain't supposed to know anything about this here job."

"Then who will they figger took all the stuff out of the stores?" demanded the wagon driver.

"Why, the cattlemen, of course," said Jennings. He raised his voice. "All right, men! Let's get goin'."

The wagons rumbled away, heading across country instead of traveling by road. With them rode Bill Jennings and nine other heavily armed gunslicks. In a few minutes the men who ran the stores for Tolson had locked the back doors and strolled casually away.

To all appearances everything was going according to Craig Tolson's plans, but the Masked Rider—Wayne Morgan—had managed to get out of town without being seen, and had reached the hideout where he had left Midnight. He quickly stripped the rigging from the roan and placed it on the black, then changed into the characteristic garments of the Masked Rider.

To his disappointment there was still no sign of Blue Hawk and he was growing more and more worried about the Yaqui. He decided that if the Indian did not return before another day and night had passed to go in search of him.

The Masked Rider swung into saddle and headed toward Spruce Valley. When he reached the valley, he rode swiftly to the Running R. Here he found Matt Rockford and some of his outfit and told them of Tolson's plan to clean out the stores and take the stock to a ranch somewhere to the northward in wagons.

"If we can just capture them wagons we'll shore put it over on Tolson," the Masked Rider told them emphatically. "You and yore outfit want to help me try, Rockford?"

"Shure do!" declared the owner of the Running R. "Soon as my men saddle up we'll get ridin'!"

"Shore it ain't a trap, Boss?" Buck Allen asked anxiously. The red-headed foreman was still on the job, apparently, the Masked Rider quickly noted. "There's likely to be a lot of Tolson's gunslicks with them wagons. We ain't got but fourteen good men left in the outfit, yuh know."

"It's no trap, Allen," the Masked Rider assured shortly, and there was a note of anger in his voice. He was growing weary of this foreman's suspicious attitude.

"Of course it ain't!" exclaimed Rockford. "Tell the boys to saddle up, and stick a kak on my black hoss, Buck." The ranch owner scowled at his foreman. "And stop arguin'."

ALLEN made no reply as he left to give the men their orders. His leather chaps rustled and the leather cuffs he always wore gleamed in the light from the ranchhouse windows.

In fifteen minutes the Running R outfit rode away, with the Masked Rider and Matt Rockford leading them. There were sixteen men all told.

The black-clad horseman knew that Tolson had ordered the wagons driven along the edge of the Bad Lands to the Bar Connected, and he planned to stop the shipment of supplies before they reached the spread.

The Masked Rider and the Running R outfit had not gone far, after circling Rocky Gulch, when they spotted the wagons topping a rise. The big vehicles were easily seen in the bright moonlight while the horsemen with the Masked Rider were hidden in some trees.

"Comin' this way," the Masked Rider announced. "Four wagons and ten mounted men. Spread out and get the drop on 'em."

The Running R outfit spread out, separating and circling to get on both sides of the wagons when they drew closer. They waited, guns ready.

"Stop!" The Masked Rider rode out as the wagons rumbled up to where he waited. His guns covered the two gunslicks who rode in front of the first

wagon. "Put up yore hands!" he shouted.

Jennings and another gunman cursed, but they raised their arms high. They didn't like the looks of those long-barreled Colts in this masked man's hands.

The drivers halted their teams and the rest of Tolson's men as quickly lifted their hands when they found themselves covered by armed men who seemed to appear from all directions.

"The rest of you men stay back there in the shadows and keep 'em covered with yore rifles!" shouted the Masked Rider to an imaginary force. "They won't start any trouble."

Tolson's gunslicks had seen sixteen men surrounding them, and when they heard the Masked Rider issuing orders to more men they surrendered without firing a shot.

"Head for Spruce Valley!" ordered Rockford jubilantly. "We ranchers can use the supplies in them wagons." He chuckled. "Mebbe Tolson'll claim we stole 'em anyway, so we might as well get 'em."

They took their prisoners to the Running R, bound and gagged the fourteen men, and left them in the big barn. The wagons were hidden in ranch buildings.

"I'm goin' to round up the ranchers in the mornin'," Matt Rockford told the Masked Rider. "We'll ride into town and take over the stores while Tolson's in jail, and we'll act mighty mad when we find them stores empty."

"Wish I could be there to see it," said the Masked Rider. "But yuh can tell me what happened. I'm leavin' now."

Buck Allen had disappeared as soon as the outfit had returned to the ranch, and the black-clad man wondered what had become of the Running R foreman. Somehow the Masked Rider didn't trust Allen. The fellow was too hot-headed and impulsive, as more than once Rockford had accused him of being.

The Masked Rider rode swiftly away from the Running R, heading back into the wild country, for he was taking no chances of somebody drygulching him on the road that led through the valley to Rocky Gulch.

Once he was out of sight of the ranch he circled around and rode northward. He reined Midnight to a halt beneath the branches of a big tree as he heard hoofbeats out on the trail.

SHORTLY a band of horsemen appeared, bandanna masks hiding their faces. There were at least thirty of them, and they were headed in the direction of the Running R.

"They goin' to try to raid that ranch again?" the Masked Rider wondered. "If they do they'll release them gunslicks of Tolson's and spoil the whole thing."

He saw the Black Band halt as a single rider loomed into view, coming from the south. The man was too far away for the Masked Rider to see his face, which was shaded by the broad brim of his Stetson, but there was something familiar about him.

"Now who is that hombre?" he mused. "Seems like I've seen him before."

He suspected the rider might be Buck Allen, but he couldn't be sure. There were five other ranches beside the Running R in the valley, and the horseman might be from any of those spreads.

The rider talked with the members of the Black Band for a few moments but they were too far off for the Masked Rider to hear what was said. Finally the bandanna-masked men wheeled their horses and rode back the way they had come.

The man in range clothes who had talked to them headed back along the trail. He did not seem in any hurry, for he was holding the pace of his horse down to a walk.

"Reckon I better trail that hombre and find out who he is," decided the Masked Rider. He sent Midnight surging forward, riding along the edge of the road, the soft grass muffling the stallion's hoof-beats. The rider ahead had disappeared where the trail turned as it wandered through the valley.

When the Masked Rider reached the spot where he had last seen the man, he cursed softly. The horseman had disappeared. The road stretched southward for over a mile, clearly visible in the moonlight, and no one was in sight.

"No tellin' where he did go," muttered the Masked Rider disgustedly, and no use tryin' to find him now." He frowned beneath his mask. "All the same I'd shore like to know just who that jasper was that could boss the Black Band around like that."

For a few moments he thought swiftly. He had an idea now that someone other

than Craig Tolson might be the leader of the Black Band. And it was up to the Masked Rider to trap that man—to bring him into the open.

"Might be Tolson is the leader at that," he ruminated. "That hombre could have been one of Tolson's men givin' the Black Band orders from their Boss."

The Masked Rider wheeled Midnight and headed for his hide-out. He was hoping fervently that Blue Hawk would be there now, for he was getting more and more worried about the Yaqui's continued absence. He would not have been too greatly surprised, though, could he have seen Blue Hawk right then. For Blue Hawk was quite busy holding a knife at Hash Dolan's throat at that moment, and the Indian was many miles away.

When the black-clad man reached the hide-out, he switched horses and again became Sheriff Morgan. Heading for Rocky Gulch he reached the town in record time and left the roan at the livery stable.

Morgan went at once to the sheriff's office and found the two waddies he had left there patiently guarding the prisoners.

"Wondered what had become of yuh, Sheriff," one of them said a little worriedly. "Not that we've needed help, though. So far this job has been a right peaceful one."

"I been takin' a little snooze at the hotel," said Morgan, with a yawn. "Figgered I might need it. No tellin' but what this is the calm before the storm."

CHAPTER XIV

The Fall of a Boss

SUNLIGHT streaming in through the barred window of the cell was hot and uncomfortable. Craig Tolson moved restlessly as he sat on his cot and mopped his face with a handkerchief that had become damp and soggy. The boss of Rocky Gulch was worried. He had a feeling that all of his plans had gone wrong.

"Latigo," he murmured. "Latigo Drake."

So long he had depended on the hatchet-faced gunslick in time of stress. It had been Drake who had suggested that it would be wise for a man in Tolson's position to have a few gunmen under his command just in case of trouble.

And now Drake was dead. Tolson could see Latigo lying there on the plank walk, and with the realization that Drake was gone, it seemed to Tolson that part of his own courage had died also.

The town boss had been growing more and more afraid of Sheriff Wayne Morgan during the long night with its dragging hours. He had misjudged Morgan. The man was more than a wandering gunslick. He was the Law here now—and apparently grim and honest Law at that.

He looked up with a start to see the man who was in his thoughts staring at him through the bars. "Rockford and the rest of the cattlemen rode into town about an hour ago," Morgan informed briefly. "They took over the stores and found them empty. Act like they are right mad about it. Rockford insists I let him talk to you."

In the next cell the two deputies ceased their bickering that had been going on all night. This might be more interesting than blaming each other for getting caught for poisoning Sheriff Hunter.

"All right." Tolson appeared to get a grip on himself as he got to his feet and walked to the cell door. "Bring Rockford in, Morgan. I'll make him sorry he took over my stores."

Morgan turned away and in a few moments returned with Rockford. The lean, gray-haired owner of the Running R glared at the prisoner angrily.

"So yuh cleaned out the stores, Tolson!" he growled. "Nothin' will stop yuh from keepin' us ranchers from gettin' supplies to keep us going—is that it?"

"You're wrong," said Tolson quietly. "I didn't know my stores had been cleaned out until Sheriff Morgan told me so this morning. You cattlemen sneaked into town and stole my stuff." He suddenly became enraged, for he was always a good actor. "But you'll pay for it, Rockford—remember that!"

He expected Matt Rockford to protest, to insist that no cattlemen had taken the supplies from the stores. But the owner of the Running R merely smiled

and nodded.

"Yeah," Rockford said, "we did get yore store supplies last night—four wagon loads. The Masked Rider was leadin' my outfit when we captured yore crew. We're holdin' fourteen of yore men prisoners right now."

FOR an instant Tolson could not believe what Rockford was saying was true, but it gradually dawned on him that the rancher was stating a simple fact. Tolson gripped the bars of the cell door so tightly that the knuckles of his fingers were white.

"You captured the wagons," he muttered dazedly. "Why, all that stuff was bought and paid for, and was to be delivered at the Bar Connected by nightfall today."

"Too bad," said Rockford. Morgan and the two deputies stood silently listening. "Well, that outfit will never get them supplies. I divided everything with the other ranchers this mornin'. We don't need to worry now if them supplies we got comin' from Pine City don't get here in a hurry."

"Latigo," murmured Tolson, brokenly. He glanced at Morgan. "Tell my men I want them," he said. "Tell them I need them, Morgan."

"There are none of yore men in town, Tolson," said Morgan. "Yuh only had ten gunslicks and the Masked Rider and, as Rockford says, the Running R outfit captured 'em all last night, as well as yore four wagon drivers.

"Then tell the men of this town that Craig Tolson wants them," commanded the boss. "They are my friends."

"Not since they found out about the way the stores were cleaned out during the night, they ain't," Rockford said flatly. "Yuh forgot that folks in Rocky Gulch have got to eat, too. And they shore didn't like the way yuh been raisin' prices."

"But I gave orders that those high prices applied only to ranchers," said Tolson. He moved back and dropped down on his bunk dejectedly. "I've been a fool," he muttered. "I saw a chance to jack up my prices when I knew my stuff was sold. If you ranchers paid what I asked that was all right. If you didn't, it wouldn't have mattered to me."

"You shore been greedy," accused Rockford. "And it looks like yuh've plumb ruined yoreself around this part of the country, Tolson. Far as I'm concerned yuh can just stay right here in jail and stew in yore own juice!"

Craig Tolson buried his face in his hands. He had never felt so utterly alone in his life. Rockford shrugged and turned away. Wayne Morgan followed the owner of the Running R out of the jail.

The day was passing swiftly. As the hours went by more and more cattle outfits rode into town. Morgan had selected ten waddies from the various spreads and kept them constantly on guard outside the jail. He was not sure whether the members of the Black Band were Tolson's men, and he was taking no chances.

As night descended Rocky Gulch seemed fairly quiet. Yet Wayne Morgan felt that a storm might break at any moment. He decided it would be wise if the Masked Rider could be on hand when trouble started, so he rode to the hide-out. He had just finished making a swift change of horses and clothing when he heard the hoof-beats of a swiftly approaching horse.

"Blue Hawk!" he exclaimed, distinct relief in his voice as the Yaqui loomed into view. "Where have yuh been?"

Blue Hawk was saddle weary, for he had been riding steadily. His gray was also tired. But he talked fast as he swung out of the kak. He told of all that had happened at the Bar Connected. When the Yaqui had finished the black-clad man nodded.

"That's the hide-out of the rustlers all right," he said. "Yuh didn't learn the name of the owner of the place, Hawk?"

"No, Senor." Blue Hawk shook his head. "None of the prisoners seemed to know that. But we've got to get back and help those men quickly."

"Of course," agreed the Masked Rider. "We'll round up the ranchers and their outfits in Rocky Gulch tonight and head for the Bar Connected at once. We should reach there by mornin'."

"We go now?" asked Blue Hawk, as he took his rigging off the gray, to change to the pinto. "Sooner we get back to help those men the better Blue Hawk will like it."

"All right." The Masked Rider swung into saddle. "Come on, Hawk. Let's ride!"

THEY headed toward town at a gallop. They had just reached the road leading into Rocky Gulch when they heard the sound of gunfire coming from the town's single street.

"The Black Band!" shouted the Masked Rider. "They must be raidin' the town!"

As the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk reached the lower end of the town they found Rocky Gulch an inferno of blazing guns. Out of the darkness had come the Black Band, their bandanna masks hiding their faces and their guns roaring as they rode into town from north and south.

Now men were firing from doors and windows, and others were going down before they could escape to a place of safety as the masked horsemen tore up and down the street pouring lead into them.

"The jail!" shouted the leader of the Black Band. "Tolson is in there! Get him out!"

The masked horsemen rushed the jail. Their guns blasted down the waddies that Morgan had placed on guard. Masked men leaped out of saddles and rushed inside. In a few moments they reappeared with the three men who had been in jail.

They forced Tolson, Norton and Grant to mount three horses at the hitch-rail, then the Black Band rode back along the street. Their horses were bunched around the three men they had taken from the jail. Their guns raked the windows and doors on either side of the street as they roared toward the north end of the town. Bullets whistled about their heads. One masked man uttered a wild cry and dropped out of saddle as a slug caught him.

Then the Masked Rider loomed ahead of them. His guns were roaring and bucking in his hands as he sent the great stallion surging toward his foes. His sure aim was taking toll of the bandanna-masked crew, but even though some of them went down the rest of the Black Band swept rapidly toward him.

Bullets tore into his black hat, one of them thudded into the pommel of his saddle just below the horn. Blue Hawk had halted the pinto and was using the carbine he had brought from the hide-out.

"Keep ridin', men!" shouted the leader of the Black Band. "We got to get to the ranch!"

They passed the Masked Rider as the hammers of his Colts clicked on empty chambers. He had to take time to reload his guns. Then the Black Band was gone, the drumming of their horses' hoofs fading into the distance. Behind them the stillness of death lingered over Rocky Gulch as the smoke of battle cleared away.

The Masked Rider swiftly thrust his reloaded guns back into holsters. With a word to Blue Hawk to remain where he was, the Masked Rider rode along the street—a solitary black-clad figure.

"Don't shoot," shouted a cattleman who glimpsed the man on the big black horse. "It's the Masked Rider!"

"Get yore hosses!" called the Masked Rider as he rode along the street. "We're goin' to trail that band of lobos and clean 'em out once and for all! I know where they're headed! I'll lead yuh there! Get ridin'!"

Ranchers and their crews who had come through the battle unhurt rushed to horses as they heard his clarion call. They swung into saddles, ready for the Masked Rider to lead them in pursuit of the Black Band.

MANY Rocky Gulch citizens were joining the ranchers, and the Masked Rider was not surprised. These men were not in sympathy with Craig Tolson or with the Black Band.

"All right, Hawk!" he called. "Come on, yuh've got to lead us."

The Yaqui rode out of the shadows and joined the Masked Rider.

"This Indian knows the way to the rustler hide-out, the Masked Rider said, as the possemen looked at the Yaqui in surprise. "Blue Hawk was held prisoner by them sidewinders and got away just a little while ago."

"We'll clean out that bunch this time or die tryin'!" shouted Rockford.

With Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider in the lead, the cavalcade rode out of town. Grim-faced men who were determined to clean up the rustlers for good.

As they headed steadily northward along the edge of the Bad Lands, the moon was shining brightly. The hours seemed marked by steady pounding hoofs as the impromptu posse rode on-

ward, heading ever northward with the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk in the lead.

Dawn was just breaking when Blue Hawk told them that they were aproaching the Bar Connected.

"Never mind the ranch now," said the Masked Rider. "Head for Indian Gulch and let's see if we can help them men guardin' the herd."

As they drew near the gulch the sound of gunfire came to their ears. Hands went to the guns in their holsters as they heard the call to battle. They speeded up their tired horses and raced forward.

Reaching the gulch, eyes narrowed and curses came from men's lips as they saw the bunch of men from the ranch who were battling the prisoners. The men who had escaped from the Bar Connected were stationed at various points up in the rocks. Tired men who had fought for nearly twenty-four hours against foes who greatly outnumbered them. Some were wounded and two had died, but those who could fight were still battling grimly.

"Spread out!" commanded the Masked Rider. "Get that bunch from the ranch! Let's go!"

They spread out, riding into the gulch with guns roaring in their hands. To Hash Dolan and the Bar Connected men, it seemed as though a swarm of angry locusts on horseback had descended upon them. There were only twenty men with the foreman of the big ranch and when he saw five of these go down beneath the blazing lead of the attacking force it was more than Dolan could stand.

"We surrender!" he shouted, tossing his smoking gun to the ground and shooting up his hands high above his head. "There ain't no use in all of us bein' killed!"

The rest of his men gave up when they heard the foreman. They dropped their weapons and reached up "to clutch sky." Quickly they were tied, their hands behind their backs.

"Take 'em back to the ranch," ordered Rockford. "We'll get the rest of 'em there."

"No, wait!" shouted the Masked Rider, as he glanced over his shoulder. "Here comes that other bunch with Tolson and the two deputies. Let's clean them out, too!"

CHAPTER XV

Enough Rope

COMPLETELY exhausted, former prisoners climbed down off the rocks, to be given the job of guarding the captured men from the Bar Connected outfit. The cattlemen rode away to battle the Black Band.

The Masked Rider led the men who had come with him from Rocky Gulch. As the Black Band saw them approach, they went into action. There were at least forty of the bandanna-masked men, and for a time the two forces seemed evenly matched. The Masked Rider who appeared to be everywhere at once, with his roaring guns driving his own men into a fighting frenzy that nothing seemed able to stop.

"Get 'em!" he shouted, reloading his guns for the third time. He sent the black stallion charging toward the foe. "Blast 'em all down!"

A waddy got a bullet in his right arm, but switched his gun over to his left hand and kept on fighting, even though he could no longer manage his horse and the animal was running wild.

"Keep goin', men!" boomed Matt Rockford. The old owner of the Running R was proving that he had plenty of nerve and courge. "We're winnin'!"

Men died in a blaze of gunsmoke that morning, and the battle at the Bar Connected was one that was told about in bunkhouse and ranchhouse in Spruce Valley for years afterward. Always it was the daring of the Masked Rider that highlighted the tale each time it was told.

The Black Band finally had enough. They threw down their guns and sullenly surrendered. The bandanna masks were snatched off and hard faces were revealed.

When the battle was over and all the prisoners had been marshaled together a solitary rider appeared, his horse going at a gallop as he headed toward the scene of the conflict.

As the rider drew closer the Masked Rider saw that he was Buck Allen. The red-headed foreman seemed tremendously excited.

"I just got loose!" he cried as he halted

his horse close to the Masked Rider and the cattlemen. "The Bar Connected outfit has been holdin' me a prisoner ever since last night—just like they done those other men." Allen scowled at Hash Dolan and the other captured rustlers. "The whole bunch should be lynched, pronto!"

"Then Tolson shore enough was the leader of the Black Band?" Rockford was scowling also—at the boss of Rocky Gulch who was among the prisoners. "Figgered he must be."

"No, Tolson isn't the leader," the Masked Rider said flatly. His eyes were fixed on a diamond-shaped scar on Allen's wrist that was no longer hidden by the leather cuffs the foreman always wore. "The leader of the Black Band is a slick hombre named Frisco Steve Lang."

"But Tolson is Frisco Steve Lang!" protested Wake Grant as the two deputies listened. "Morgan told us so."

"No, he didn't," said the Masked Rider. "I run across the sheriff back in Rocky Gulch just after the Black Band attacked the town. Morgan was hit bad, but he talked before he died. He just mentioned Frisco Steve Lang to you two deputies and yuh figgered he meant Tolson, so yuh was willin' to arrest the boss of Rocky Gulch and claim the reward money."

"Then who is Frisco Steve Lang?" demanded Rockford.

"I'll get to that in a minute," the Masked Rider said cooly. "Lang was the head of a bunch of train robbers. Looks like him and some of his men took the twenty thousand they got from a train robbery and bought the ranch here. This spread is too far away from Spruce Valley for the ranchers there to know much about it."

"Yeah," agreed Rockford. "I knew there was some outfit way to the north of us, but since it was a couple of days ride from the valley we never paid much mind to it."

"Which is what Lang and his outfit that called themselves the Black Band figgered when they started the rustlin'," assured the Masked Rider. "They stole cattle on the trail drives, brought 'em here, and changed the brands into that long one they been usin'."

ROCKFORD was still bewildered. "But if Tolson wasn't workin' with Lang's outfit why did he raise his prices all of a sudden?" he demanded to know.

"I'll tell you that," Tolson himself said quickly. "Because I was a fool. I had some money when I came to Rocky Gulch and bought the places I own there. But I haven't been so rich since. When the foreman of the Bar Connected came to me and told me he wanted to buy all the supplies in my stores to stock up his ranch, I agreed."

"And then tried to get even more money by them tricks yuh planned to work on us cattlemen!" exclaimed Rockford disgustedly. "Yuh shore ain't a man I admire, Tolson."

"I think this whole bunch should be lynched!" Buck Allen shouted defiantly.

"That's the second time yuh've said that," growled Hash Dolan, glowering at the red-headed foreman. "If we stretch rope then yuh're shore goin' to do it with us, Boss!"

ALLEN cursed, then sat motionless in his saddle as he found himself covered by a gun in the Masked Rider's hand.

"There's a sayin' that if yuh give a man enough rope he'll hang hisself, Lang," reminded the Masked Rider. "And yuh shore talked yoreself into it!"

"Lang!" roared Rockford. "Yuh mean to say Buck Allen is this Frisco Steve Lang yuh been tellin' us about?"

"He shore is." The Masked Rider shrugged. "I've seen wanted dodgers for Lang. The description on 'em mention a diamond-shaped scar on his wrist. Yuh can see that scar on Allen's wrist right now."

"Too bad, Boss," Wake Grant said mockingly, and he was looking at Allen, too. "Figgered yuh might have made a mistake when yuh told Norton to put that poison in the sheriff's likker. Been better if yuh had let old Seth live. He was honest, but dumb."

"Yuh're right," Allen gave in bitterly. "I wouldn't have kept that foreman's job on the Runnin' R if it hadn't been for Sue. I—I aimed to drive out all the cattlemen so's I could take over their ranches. I wanted to be the greatest cattle king there was, so she would look up to me."

"Sometimes love will make a bad man worse, makin' him want power," the

Masked Rider said. "I started suspectin' yuh when yuh knocked over the lamp at the ranchhouse, Allen. Yuh done that deliberate, so Wake Grant could get away. And Latigo Drake must have found out somethin' about yuh or yuh wouldn't have killed him like yuh did."

"Drake was too smart!" flared Allen. "He found out them four men up on the roofs that day who started firin' at the cattlemen with rifles was strangers in town, and he seen me talkin' to 'em. He was tryin' to make me pay him hush money, so I killed him."

"There's the man who's been back of the whole thing." The Masked Rider stood back, nodding toward Allen. "Frisco Steve Lang, who has been calling himself Buck Allen around here."

"And he was smart enough never to ride with the Black Band." Rockford was frowning heavily as Allen was pulled off his horse and tied up like the other prisoners. "Looks like yuh've about cleaned up things around here, Masked Rider. You and Sheriff Morgan."

"Too bad about Morgan," the Masked Rider said sadly. "I shore hated to see him die. Better, though, mebbe. If he'd lived it would have been with no face. It'll be hard to tell which body is his."

"Reckon we cattlemen will have to be the law now, until we get a new sheriff," Rockford said bluntly." We'll just have to be."

The Masked Rider thrust his gun back into holster, wheeled Midnight and rode away. Blue Hawk started the pinto in pursuit. Rockford and the rest of the ranchers would handle Allen, Tolson and the rest in their own way.

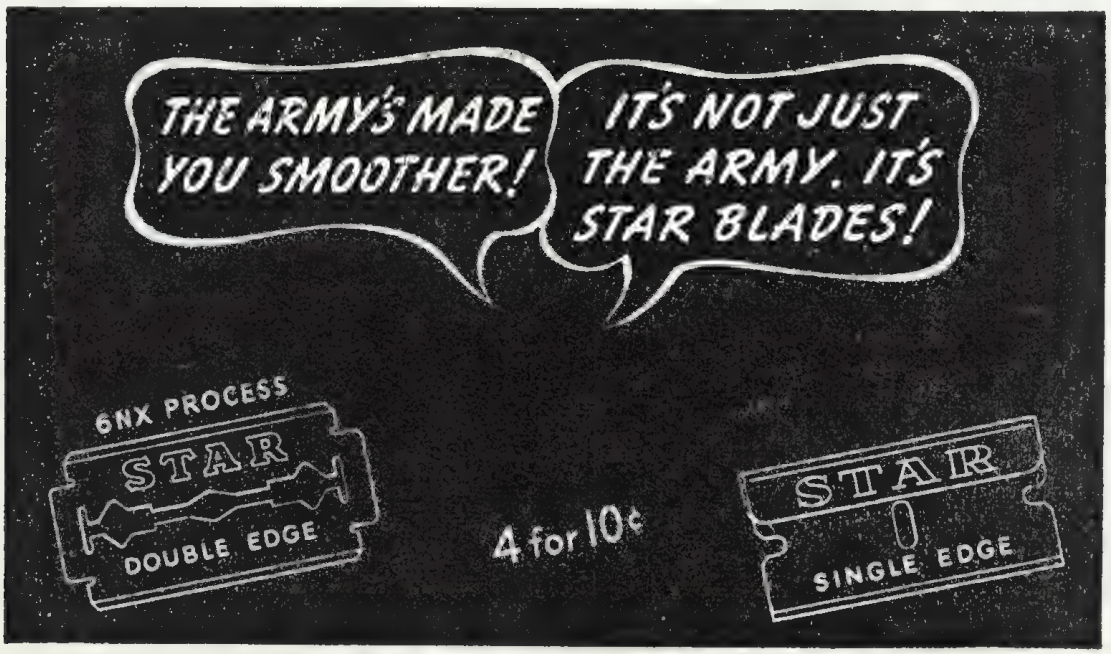
An hour later the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were heading back to the hide-out. The men of Rocky Gulch and Spruce Valley would probably never see them again, but they were satisfied. Their work here had been well done.

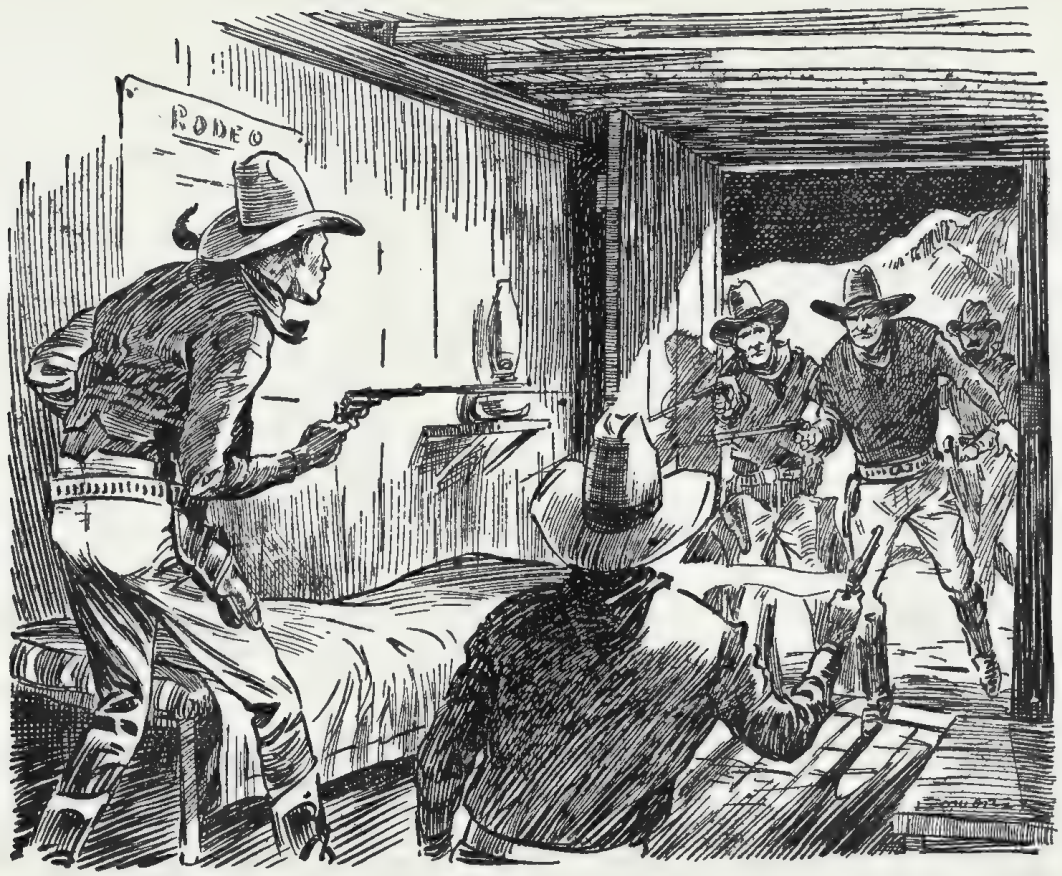
FURTHER EXCITING EXPLOITS OF WAYNE MORGAN IN

STEEL RAILS TO PERIL

By CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

NEXT ISSUE'S COMPLETE MASKED RIDER NOVEL





Gun thunder rocked the room as Dan and Steve fired at the three advancing killers

KILLERS ALSO DIE

By H. A. DE ROSSO

Dan Drummond Seeks His Father's Killer in a Showdown Battle That Brings Him Gunsmoke Aid from the Suspected Murderer!

THE target was made of white pine boards to the approximate width and height of a medium-sized man. It was nailed to the trunk of an alder and a circle had been drawn on the target where the heart of a man would be.

The man who stood staring at the circle and at the five bullets in that circle was tall and lean. He wasn't much more than a boy, only twenty-one, but the lines about his lips were stiff and hard and there was a look, as cold as old ice, in his bleak gray eyes.

He had just punched the five empty shells from his Colt's .45 and he was reloading while he stared with a bitter satisfaction at the bullet holes in the target.

He had just shoved the last fresh shell home when he heard the footsteps behind him and he whirled, his eyes narrowing. But when he saw the other the tenseness flowed out of the young fellow and he holstered his weapon.

The newcomer walked up to the target and his heavy lips broke in a grin.

"You don't miss any more, Dan," he said.

Dan Drummond stared off at the barns and corrals and office building of Train & McCall, Freighters. He stared long and hard at the big white sign with its red lettering that was nailed high on the office wall. Five years ago that sign had read:

DRUMMOND STAGE LINES
MIKE DRUMMOND, PROP.

"No," Dan Drummond said slowly. "I don't miss any more, Grant."

Grant Train cocked his head to one side, staring intently at the young man. A shadow of irritation passed briefly across Train's face. That was the impression Dan Drummond had always had of Grant Train—heaviness.

It was in the man's build, his thick shoulders and burly chest, in the weight of his stride and in his low, rolling voice.

Train shrugged and looked again at the target.

"Dan," he said quietly. "McCall tells me yuh've been askin' questions."

A tight smile pulled at Dan's lips.

"Shouldn't I?"

"Don't get me wrong, Dan." Grant Train laughed easily. "Only, why not ask me?"

"Melvin McCall handled all of Mike Drummond's legal affairs. He should know better than any one else. All I wanted was a record of all those bills Mike was supposed to owe."

A flush rose to Train's face.

"I don't like what yuh're sayin', Dan. Mike left me in charge when he was killed. You saw the will. You read it yourself. I was to be in charge of the Drummond Stage Lines until yuh came of age. I was appointed yore guardian.

"But Mike owed a lot of money. I always thought he'd been well off. But there were all those notes. I couldn't make ends meet so I had to go bankrupt. Lucky me and McCall were able to borrow enough money to buy the stageline at auction.

"That's how it is, Dan. I'm sorry things turned out like this. But don't worry. Yuh'll have a job with Train & McCall as long as yuh want it. Maybe in a few years yuh might even become a junior partner. Who knows?" And he clapped Dan on the back and Train's smile was affable.

DAN DRUMMOND studied the ground at his feet. He knew a vast shame for his words. He shouldn't complain about Grant Train. The man had sent Dan through college, had given him a job a month ago when he'd finished his schooling. Yet that vague doubt persisted in Dan's mind.

"I know that, Grant," Dan explained. "But I'd still like to see Mike's papers. Just to be convinced."

"Didn't McCall tell yuh?" Train asked, looking narrowly at the young man. "Mike's papers and books all burned up about four years ago. A fire broke out in the office."

"Yeh, he told me," said Dan. "But I can't see how Mike went broke like that about the time he was killed. I was only sixteen then but it seems to me that Mike was well off."

Grant Train was shaking his head.

"With the records destroyed, I can't convince yuh, Dan. Mike probably let on to yuh he had a paying proposition. He was kind of proud that way. But, the truth was Drummond Stage Lines had to borrow a lot of money to carry on.

"Competition did that, Dan. Mike was too easy-goin'. That's why Train & McCall is makin' money. There's no competition." And Grant Train's laugh was low and hard.

Dan knew a cold silence. In the month he'd worked for Train & McCall he'd found out why the stageline had no competition. He had only to look at Grant Train's two gun-hung division managers —Ash Pickering and Bart Yoder. And listen to the rumors of smashed wagons and poisoned horses and dead men. Yes, Train & McCall was making money.

Train turned his head and looked again at the target.

"I reckon yuh're anxious to meet up with Steve Hodge."

"Yeah," Dan said bleakly.

That was the moment he was living for —the moment he'd come face to face with Steve Hodge, who'd shot Mike Drummond in the back five years ago.

Train's heavy laugh sounded queer to Dan.

"You might meet him any day now. I got word he'd been hangin' out in the hills. . . ."

The next day Dan Drummond was making entries in the big ledger when he heard the galloping horse outside the office of Train & McCall. The window was beside Dan. He looked out and saw Ash Pickering, who ran the Rincon division, drawing up his blowing horse.

Grant Train was standing by the blacksmith shop, directing the repair of a broken spring on a Concord. Pickering dismounted by Train and spoke a few words in the man's ear.

Train glanced up at the office window and Dan thought he saw the heavy man grin. Then Train was crossing the yard and Ash Pickering was leading his blown

horse to the corral gate.

Grant Train stepped heavily into the office, stood staring at Dan. The muscles about Train's lips kept twitching as though from irritation or tension.

"Well, Dan, it's come," Train spoke quietly. "You can have yore crack at Hodge if yuh want it."

Dan was on his feet in a trice. He was conscious of the sudden pounding of his heart and the way his fingers kept curling as if closing about the handle of a gun.

"Where is he?"

"Not half an hour's ride from here. I've had the boys on the look-out for him ever since he slipped back into the country about three months ago. But he's a slippery son. Ash Pickering just brought me word they've found him."

"Will he get away?" Dan asked, taking down his gun-belt and strapping it about his waist.

"I don't think so. Ash says Hodge has been hidin' out at the old Jensen shaft. Ash left Bart Yoder on watch. I told the boys, ever since yuh come back, Dan, that Hodge is yore meat. I know how much Mike meant to yuh. I'd like to kill that back-shootin' son myself, but I reckon you're entitled to it more than any one else."

Dan reached out, touching Train's shoulder briefly.

"Thanks, Grant. Thanks," Dan whispered, then he was running down the steps.

SWEAT ran down Dan Drummond's lean cheeks. He felt a tingling tenseness and a killing hatred that left him all tightened up. He had turned off the old, unused road into the huge boulders and stunted jackpine that rimmed the road on either side.

Behind him he left Bart Yoder and Ash Pickering. They were atop the vantage point of a small butte that gave them full view of the abandoned mine. Bart Yoder had waited atop that butte through the sweltering hours of midday and he reported that he had not seen Steve Hodge leave the place.

Dan Drummond rode with one hand on his six-gun. He'd have to proceed cautiously and sight Steve Hodge first or Dan would get a bullet in his back. Just like Mike Drummond had got his.

Dan tried to remember what Steve Hodge looked like. A small, wizened man with a thin, V-shaped face and bright, black, darting eyes. A meek-looking fellow except for those lively eyes. But you can't always depend on appearances, Dan reckoned.

He remembered vividly the quarrel between Steve Hodge and Mike Drummond. They'd been rival freighters and Mike had underbid Steve Hodge on a freighting contract. Steve Hodge had taken that mighty hard. He'd loaded up on whiskey and tried to thrash big Mike Drummond. Big Mike had taken little Steve Hodge by the shirt collar and thrown him out of the office.

Dan had been in the freight yard, helping a teamster to hitch up. He still saw the scene as vividly as though it were happening now. Little Steve Hodge getting up out of the dust, his black eyes snapping, his fists clenched.

"I'll get yuh, Mike Drummond!" he'd called out.

The next day Mike Drummond had been found beside the road to Rincon. Shot in the back. And Ash Pickering, who'd just been hired a week before by Grant Train, had seen Hodge fleeing from the scene of the crime.

Ash Pickering swore to that at the inquest with his hand on the Bible. So posses scoured the hills, but Steve Hodge had disappeared. . . .

Dan was close to the mine buildings now. The mine hadn't been operated for several years. He remembered that just before he'd gone away to school that there'd been talk that Jensen's Mine was petering out.

He left his gelding in a clump of jackpine and proceeded on foot. He stopped at the rear of the hoist house and looked about him. The shaft was to his left but Steve Hodge wouldn't be hiding there.

He'd select one of the buildings for he'd have a horse to conceal. Dan was standing there, thinking, when he heard the thump.

It came again, from a building beyond the hoist house. Dan listened. When he heard it a third itme he knew what it was. The restless pawing of a horse on a board floor.

Excitement flowed like the heat of wine through his brain. He drew his gun, ran crouching low for the door of the building. Nothing happened and he pulled up, panting, with his back to the wall beside the closed door. Again that thumping

came from inside, but Dan waited.

There was something mighty queer here. That was a horse inside. Likely Steve Hodge's horse. But where was Hodge? He wouldn't have let Dan run across that open space between the hoist and the office building without at least a challenge.

The door was not closed very tightly for the latch was broken and Dan shoved out one long leg, kicking the door open. He leaped inside, flattening his back against the wall, his gun held ready.

Sunlight, slanting through a window, fell upon the man. He lay on the floor, asleep. The horse, a buckskin, was tethered in a far corner.

The slamming of the door woke the sleeping man and he sat up abruptly, clawing for his gun that lay beside him. Then he saw the cocked .45 in Dan's hand and the man drew his fingers away from his weapon. He was small and wiry with quick, flashing eyes and a worn, thin face.

"Well, Johnny Law," he laughed raspingly. "Looks like yuh've got me cold."

"I'm not the law," Dan said quietly. "I'm Dan Drummond."

Hodge rose slowly, carefully to his feet. He stood there a while, staring unblinkingly at Dan's hard face and at the gun in his hand.

"You can pick up yore belt and put it on," Dan went on in that same low, dead tone. "I'll give yuh a chance—more of a chance than yuh gave Mike!"

Hodge did not move.

"Yuh've got it all wrong, Drummond. I didn't kill yore pa. And if I had, I wouldn't have shot him in the back!"

DAN'S laugh was raspingly bitter. His eyes were hard and narrow.

"Nothing yuh can say will change my mind, Steve Hodge. I remember how Mike threw yuh out of his office and how yuh promised yuh'd get him. I've carried that memory with me for five years. If yuh're innocent, why did yuh run when the law came huntin' yuh?"

"I had to run or get shot down for no reason at all! Grant Train and Ash Pickering ran into me on the Rincon road. They had deputy badges on their shirts. They didn't say nothin'. They just opened up on me and I had to run or be a dead man!

"Then I found out about Mike Drummond and how I'd been framed, so I quit the country. Pickering lied when he said he saw me runnin' away from the scene of the crime."

"Well, yuh've had yore say, Hodge," Dan said coldly. "Now pick up that gun!"

Hodge's face was gray in the slanting sunlight.

"I reckon it's no use talkin'. I've known all along I've been framed good and tight and I was a blasted fool to come back here. But I've ridden the owlhoot for five years and I can't stand that life no more. I came back here, Dan Drummond, to square myself. To find out who really killed Mike Drummond and clear my name."

"So?"

"I got my suspicions but no proof. If yuh ask me, it was Grant Train who killed yore pa. Him and that shyster lawyer, Melvin McCall. If Train didn't do it, then him and McCall hired someone. They framed it on me because lots of people heard me threaten Mike.

"You can see it, can't yuh, boy? How them two have taken over the Drummond Stage Lines?"

Dan's lips curved in a tight smile.

"Yuh're partly right, Hodge. Train and McCall have taken that stageline away from me. I've known that a long time and I'm gettin' it back.

"But you ain't puttin' nothin' over on me, Steve Hodge. Maybe Train and McCall did hire someone to kill Mike. If that's how it stands then they hired you. Shore Grant Train and Ash Pickering tried to shoot yuh down. To shut yore mouth so yuh couldn't tell on them if the law picked you up!

"Everything's clear to me now, Steve Hodge. Grant Train and Melvin McCall got yuh to do their dirty work. Well, I'm settlin' with them. But first I'm settlin' with you!"

His voice was a feral whisper.

"Pick up that gun or I'll pull trigger anyhow!"

Steve Hodge's thin shoulders suddenly slumped as though a heavy weight were pressing down on them. His voice was dead and infinitely weary.

"Go ahead and shoot then, yuh bullheaded young fool!"

Sweat was streaming down Dan Drummond's face. He took a step forward, away from the wall. He knew a sudden, futile anger. He'd waited five long, agonizing years for this moment, but Dan had

never reckoned on Steve Hodge backing down.

The way Dan had always planned it had been to call down Steve Hodge and then let the man go for his gun. Kill him fair and square, not a treacherous shot in the back or a cold-blooded killing. Yet, Steve Hodge wouldn't fight back and Dan couldn't shoot down the man in cold blood.

A frustrated sob shook the young fellow. Hodge's head suddenly lifted and his eyes grew wide and he yelled: "Look out, Dan!"

Then Hodge was diving for his gun that lay at his feet. Dan was caught off-guard. Steve Hodge had looked so submissive. Dan had reckoned on going up to the man and taking him in to the law. Dan's fine edge of wariness had been dulled and his reactions were slowed up.

His gun roared but he knew he had missed. Steve Hodge was down on his knees. His fingers had closed about the handle of his .45 and he was whipping up the weapon.

Dan tried to thumb back his hammer, get off another shot, but a blinding blow struck his head and he staggered, feeling a wave of blackness rushing down on him. He strove to brace his legs, to stay upright, while he drew a hand across his darkening eyes.

Hodge was a blurred, weaving, shimmering image. The red splashes were the flames of his shots and the thunder in Dan's ears was the roar of Steve Hodge's six-gun.

The Colt was a heavy weight in Dan's hand. It kept pulling him down toward the floor. He put out his left hand to brace himself on his knees but he found that his strength was gone. Now he couldn't see at all. . . .

THE world was a heaving, dancing thing before Dan Drummond's eyes. The pain in his head as he sat up reeled his senses and a violent nausea gripped him, but he leaned back and found the wall behind him. He sat there, breathing heavily, while the shock and dizziness passed.

He looked about him, saw that he was still in the office building. The sun had set and the early shadows had darkened the interior so that it was with difficulty that he made out Hodge's horse still tied in its corner.

That was all. The building was deserted. He groped around until he found his Colt. He ejected the one empty shell and put in a fresh cartridge. Then he shoved the gun in its holster and rose to his feet.

He lifted a hand to his head and felt the ugly, searing gash that was now sticky with drying blood. He dropped his fingers away and a hard grin twisted his lips. Steve Hodge must have been in a big hurry to get away. He'd left Dan for dead and run for it probably because the shooting had attracted Ash Pickering and Bart Yoder.

But where were they? And why had Steve Hodge left his horse behind?

Dan took Hodge's horse and led the restless buckskin outside.. He walked over to where he'd left his own gelding but the animal was gone.

Dan stopped trying to figure things out. He swung aboard Hodge's horse and started the animal up the old, unused mine road. The chill night air drove the shadow from his mind. He felt his strength returning and the world stopped its reeling. He kept the horse to a walk, meanwhile turning the whole situation over in his mind.

He knew that today had been his last day working for Train & McCall. Grant Train's smooth talk and solicitous ways weren't going to deceive Dan any longer. Train had stolen the Drummond Stage Lines, stolen it with the aid of shyster Melvin McCall.

Their stories of heavy indebtedness and burnt records were a little too pat, a little too convenient. Dan knew now why Grant Train had shipped him off to school immediately after Mike's death.

Train had wanted the boy out of the way while he and Melvin McCall started their machinations. Train, playing the big-hearted, solicitous guardian, had kept Dan away while Drummond Stage Lines were broken and stolen.

It had been Grant Train's good fortune that the Drummond Stage Lines had been left in his hands. Train had been Mike Drummond's lieutenant for some four years. The man had proved himself a capable fellow and when Mike had made out his will, he'd probably reckoned that Grant Train would make the best possible manager of the stageline until young Dan came of age. That had been Mike's mistake. . . .

Dan figured it was close to midnight by the time he reached Rincon. The town was still with the hush of night. The last pony had been taken from the hitch-racks and not a light was showing as Dan rode his buckskin at a walk down the main street. He turned down Ferris Street until he came to Melvin McCall's new house.

Probably built with McCall's share of the loot, Dan thought, and that feral grin framed his lips briefly. He was going to have it out with McCall.

Dan left his horse ground-hitched before the gate and stepped softly down the walk to McCall's front door. But he paused with his hand on the latch for he'd heard a sound—a noise as of a window being forced open. Dan edged along the front of the house, peered around the corner.

His hand flashed to his gun and the click as he cocked the hammer of his .45 was abnormally loud in the stillness of the night.

"We meet again, hey, Hodge?" Dan called softly.

Hodge had both hands gripping the window sill, ready to pull himself inside, but he released his hold and took a backward step. His breath was coming in short, quick gasps.

"Reportin' to McCall on yore job, Hodge? Ready to tell him that I'm dead and to pay yore wages!"

Hodge didn't say anything. Dan stepped ahead and took the man's gun.

"Me and you are callin' on McCall together, Hodge."

The fellow shrugged. "That's what I come for. To break McCall and clear my name."

Dan laughed in Hodge's face.

"Now I'll tell one," Dan jeered.

Quick anger flashed across the little man's features.

"You blind, bull-headed fool!" he hissed. "Come on and face McCall. I'm right anxious to make yuh swallow a lot of yore words!"

MELVIN McCALL was shivering even though his robe was heavy and warm and the chill of night had not penetrated his new house. He rose from the cot where he had been seated, a pale-faced, frightened creature, nervously licking his lips, glancing from Dan's resolute face to the death that shone in Steve Hodge's piercing eyes.

"Yuh've got it all wrong, Dan," McCall was saying. "Like I told yuh, there are no records left of the Drummond Stage Lines. A fire broke out in the office—"

"I've heard that before," Dan broke in. He waved his gun at Steve Hodge. "This is the man who killed Mike, but he was put up to it. He got paid for that. Who paid him, McCall?"

McCall's eyes grew wide. "I don't know what yuh're talking about!"

Dan's laugh was cold with bitterness.

"You and Grant Train paid him, McCall! You probably hatched the whole plot. Mike let yuh handle all his legal affairs. He came to yuh to make out his will. When yuh saw that he left the stageline in Train's hands until I came of age, you called on Train and hatched the whole, rotten business.

"You picked Hodge for the killin'. He had reasons for it and he had his price. That's why Grant Train and Ash Pickering were so anxious to be deputized and set out after Hodge. So they could help him skip the country.

"But now yuh've called him back because yuh've got another job. I've been askin' too many questions. Train told me that yesterday. Then today he rigged up a neat little trap for me. Lucky Hodge was asleep or he'd have got me like he got Mike!"

"Yuh've got it figured out, Dan," Steve Hodge put in, "but yuh haven't got it all straight. Believe me, boy, when I say I didn't kill Mike, that it was all a frame. That's why I come here tonight. To get the lowdown from McCall and clear my name."

"Yeah?"

"For five years I've dodged the law. I've lived like a hunted coyote. It was Ash Pickering and Bart Yoder shot yuh this afternoon, Dan. They sneaked up behind yuh. I tried to yell but it was too late. I shot it out with them and I was lucky to get away. I found yore horse. Otherwise, I'd be a dead man.

"Can't yuh see, Dan? It was their plan to kill both of us and then say we'd killed each other! As for Mike—it was either Train or Ash Pickering, who did the killin' and then blamed it on me. And McCall was in on it, too."

Dan didn't say anything for a while. He'd never trusted Steve Hodge. There never had been a doubt in Dan's mind that

Hodge had killed Mike. Yet, there was a bright, aroused gleam in Hodge's eyes, a fierce intensity in his talk that showed he was sincere.

"All right, Hodge. If only McCall would agree. I'd believe yuh."

"I'll make him agree," Steve Hodge said fiercely, leaping at the lawyer.

McCall squalled and went crashing back in his chair. He hit the floor with Steve Hodge on top of him. The outlaw's hands were closed about McCall's throat.

"They'll hang me if I'm ever caught," Hodge grated. "But I'll give them reason to."

McCall's face had purpled when Dan dragged Steve Hodge away. Dan lifted the lawyer back in his chair, placed pen and paper before him. "Yuh don't have to talk, mister," Dan said. "Just write."

Breath was sobbing through McCall's teeth.

"Yuh'll leave me go if I do it, won't yuh? It was all Grant Train's idea.

"Hodge wasn't in on it. Train wanted to kill you, too, Dan, five years ago, but I held him back. It was his idea that Mike be killed and that I draw up a false will giving Train control of the stageline before he faked the bankruptcy. The real will left everything outright to you. I'll write out everything, if yuh'll let me go."

"All right," Dan said thinly.

The silence was broken only by the scratching of McCall's pen. Dan read the whole awful truth, word for word, as McCall's trembling fingers guided the pen. As he finished and signed his name, Dan looked at Steve Hodge.

"I'm sorry, Steve," Dan murmured.

"It's all right, boy," Hodge said, his grin making him look years younger. "You couldn't think different the way things were."

Dan handed Hodge his gun. McCall had risen to his feet. His face was the color of dirty ashes.

"Can I go?" he asked. "Train will kill me if ever he catches me."

"Yeah, you can go," a heavy voice said. "Straight to blazes!"

DAN'S breath drew in sharply. He heard Steve Hodge's startled curse. Three men had come into the room. So quietly had they entered that they'd gone unnoticed until one of them spoke. It was Grant Train. Behind him stood Ash Pickering and Bart Yoder.

They had guns in their hands and now Grant Train stepped forward, the floor creaking under his weight.

Pickering and Yoder fanned out on either side of him. Train walked up to the desk, snatched up McCall's confession and read it, rage purpling his face.

"You dirty, lowdown, yellow bellied son," he said then to Melvin McCall. "Yuh'd sell me out to save yore skin! Scared out of yore mind by a two-bit bluff. If me and the boys hadn't come back just now from huntin' for Dan and Hodge and seen yore light, yuh'd be packin' and runnin' for it, after stickin' my neck in the noose!

"But I ain't belly-achin'. I couldn't have asked for a better set-up. It'll be easy to explain." Train was laughing heavily. "Why, any blind fool can see that Steve Hodge called on yuh, Mel. And Dan came atrailin' Hodge. There was a big shoot-out. Hodge got Mel and Dan got Hodge but not before Hodge got him!"

As he spoke, Grant Train had moved back toward the open door with Pickering and Yoder. He whispered now to Yoder who turned away and made a circle of the house.

"All clear!" Yoder said, coming back toward the door.

"Here goes, Drummond!" yelled Train with a laugh and his gun and Pickering's began to flame.

Dan and Steve Hodge leaped to one side simultaneously, guns streaking into their hands. McCall rushed for the cover of his desk. Gun thunder rocked the room, then, as Dan and Steve fired at the three advancing killers.

Their first shots were wild. A bullet sped past Dan's face and he felt the hot breath of it upon his check. McCall gave a piercing shriek and sank to the floor. Then Dan was falling of his own volition scrambling behind McCall's desk.

"I got me the old wolf!" Pickering was yelling. "Now I'm killin' the cub."

But his lead only chewed off a corner of the desk. Dan's gun was blasting now. Pickering took the bullets in his chest, rocking back on his heels, mouth open to scream but no sounds issuing from him.

Grant Train was in a crouch, that heavy laugh still bubbling in his throat. His gun blasted again, the bullet smashing an inkwell, spattering ink all over Dan's shirt.

Dan's lips were grim. His .45 was leveled.

"This is what I was practicin' for," he said, and saw the sudden terror the words inspired in Grant Train.

The man threw up his left hand as though he could ward off the bullet and then a choking grunt came from him as Dan fired.

Train reached out for the desk to support himself, but his grip slipped and he fell with a heavy thud. But that ponderous laugh was starting in his throat again.

Dan looked about him. Ash Pickering was dead, huddled up in a tight ball in the middle of the floor. Bart Yoder sat in a far corner but his eyes were lifeless.

Steve Hodge leaned against the wall, holding a bullet-shattered arm. And Grant Train's laugh came, eerily triumphant amid the sound of tearing paper.

Dan rushed over to Train. The torn remnants of McCall's confession lay over Train's bloodied shirt. His glazing eyes sought Dan's.

"Yuh'll never get yore stageline back now. There will only be yore word, and Hodge's—and Hodge will hang for killin' Mike Drummond. Maybe—yuh'll hang, too, Dan."

Dan stood there, staring at Grant Train's lifeless body, tasting the full bitterness of his defeat. He'd killed Grant Train and Ash Pickering. But that wouldn't bring the stageline back to him. Grant Train had a brother in Texas. He'd inherit the stageline.

And poor little Steve Hodge, sobbing his frustration and his pain. He'd hang for Mike Drummond's killing—for here was the sheriff with his nightshirt tucked into his trousers, walking into the room. And the town marshal, too, taking Dan's gun and Steve Hodge's gun while the sheriff knelt beside the groaning Melvin McCall.

Then as Dan stared at the tattered remnants of the confession note, a light of hope came into his eyes. A hard grin creased his lips.

"I reckon yuh're wrong, Train," he murmured, though he knew Train was beyond hearing any human utterance. "It may be a job, but with a little patience a man could arrange the pieces of that note and paste them together. So the stageline comes back to me."

"It shore does," said the sheriff, coming up behind him. "I'll help you put that note together. But even without it, the thing is clear." He jerked his head at McCall. "The skunk wasn't dead. He talked, cleared Hodge, told about the fake will, and I reckon a dyin' man don't lie."

Suddenly Dan's head lifted and the smile on his lips lost its harshness and bitterness. He walked a little unsteadily toward Steve Hodge. Hodge had heard and was laughing through the pain of his shattered arm.

"The Drummond Stage Lines will need a good manager," Dan said. "Any suggestions, Steve?"

•

Meet Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts in LAND OF MISSING MEN, by TOM GUNN, Featured Novelet in the January Issue of POPULAR WESTERN—10c Everywhere!

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LONE HAND FOR LIBERTY

By

CLINTON DANGERFIELD

Jailed for Murder and Threatened with the Loss of His Inheritance, Ney Larrigan Vows to Clear His Name and Capture His Enemies!

ANGER flamed in Dan Larrigan's weatherbeaten, middle aged face as he glared at his nephew.

"I'll give yuh just one week, Ney, in which to come back and ride for me again," he boomed. "What more could you want, you reckless fool, than being tophand now, foreman later and my heir when I die? Ain't no finer ranch than my Box L anywheres."

Ney Larrigan shrugged.

"I want freedom when my work's through," he said good-humoredly, "you want me to account to you for where I've been, what I've done as though I was a kid."

"If yuh don't quit that Whip Seven yuh've switched to and ride for me again, I'll sure change my will next Saturday," roared Larrigan, indifferent to their listeners in the general store.

His blue-eyed, red-headed heir stiffened.

"Change it today," he said. "I'm shore not interested in dead men's shoes."

Dan Larrigan scowled fiercely. "I said I'd give yuh a week to come back. My will stands till Saturday. Time yuh've thought over the matter, likely yuh'll get a dash of sense." With this he turned away and strode out of the store with his purchases.

Ney Larringan's eyes softened as he looked regretfully after the dictator of the big Box L. The interfering, bossy old fellow meant well.

A low-pitched, sneering voice nearby attracted Ney's attention.

"The way yuh look, yuh're craving them dead man's shoes after all," it drawled.

Ney Larrigan whirled toward the

Larrigan rushed at the jailer and clipped him hard behind the ear

speaker, a man whose forehead was pitched as low as his voice. The man was Sundry, a Whip Seven rider whose vicious ill will had been roused by Ney's popularity on the Whip Seven spread. Sundry had a strong dash of Digger Indian in his blood, and showed it in his features. His mind seethed with jealousies and an evil cunning.

"Watch yore rope, Saw, it's draggin'," Ney Larrigan growled.

From under a low pulled sombrero, Saw Sundry gave him a malicious glance and then stalked out of the store.

The grizzled, kindly storekeeper stared after him.

"Better watch that snake, Ney," he warned.

One of the store listeners, a tall, slender man, pale-eyed and with ash-blonde hair, dressed in ranch owner's clothes, moved over to Ney's side.

"Ride easy, Ney, with old Dan," he said. "Some day your red-headed temper will bolt with you. Our arrogant uncle never ruffles me."

NEY scowled at Douse Veer, son of his uncle's sister.

"Yuh're rich, Douse, so he doesn't try to boss you," he said. "I'm always willin' to take regular orders, but Dan wants to run my whole life. We've had one quarrel after another. We're better apart. If he ever meddles with me again . . ."

His cousin cut him off.

"No threats, Ney, against him," he advised. "You'll say what you don't mean. Come along and have a drink." Douse Veer's cool, rather monotonous voice, his pale, superior glance, silenced Ney's anger, but he refused the drink.

"I'm in town with a Whip Seven team and wagon, buyin' supplies," he explained. "Must get the wagon loaded and take it over to Wheeler's wagonyard for the night. No time to fool around, Douse."

Douse Veer lighted a cigarette. "Might get your supplies stolen."

"No. Wheeler is there all night."

"Where you putting up?"

"Buffalo Head Hotel." Ney was moving toward the store counter.

"So is our dictator uncle," drawled Douse. "Act sensible and make up with him, Ney."

Ney Larrigan whirled on him.

"You trying to run my affairs too?" he asked.

Douse shrugged. He sauntered slowly out of the store.

Ney left the wagon yard a little before dawn. He never bothered to check over his supplies under the neat tarp covering. Nothing had ever been stolen in Wheeler's yard.

Ney did not like driving. Usually he lived in the saddle.

But, even from a wagon seat, life looked mighty good to Ney Larrigan. Inheritance might be sweet, but freedom was sweeter.

He turned to look back at the fine bay he had bought in town, saddle and all, from a disgruntled tenderfoot who had been thrown by it. Haltered to the tail gate, the bay came along smoothly, its gait matching the team's.

The rhythm of the trotting horses mingled suddenly with the differing beat of a galloping horse that burgeoned out of a narrow canyon.

Ney Larrigan looked back and grinned.

"Our soreheaded bear of a sheriff—ridin' plum early, headin' our way too," he said to himself. "Yore trace is a link too long, pinto.. Reckon I'll fix it now and give him a chance to ketch up without bustin' his horse to tell his news."

The traces evened, Ney Larrigan took a look at the check-reins and was standing at the off horse's head when the sheriff came up on a lathered horse, and stopped beside the wagon. He was a bull-necked, belligerent, pop-eyed little man who secretly suffered from an inferiority complex. That doubled his natural obstinacy.

"Howdy, Sheriff." Larrigan's voice was good-humored.

"Lo," growled Whett Tarbody. His eyes were staring suspiciously.

Ney Larrigan's grin showed a flash of strong, white teeth.

"What's eatin' yuh, Sheriff? Another goosey-gander tip?"

Totally without any sense of humor, Tarbody, who several times had been made to appear as a fool by phony tips, scowled at the cowboy.

"Maybe this time it ain't phony. Stay where yuh are by that horse. Where's yore gun?"

"Back there on the wagon seat. Yuh had a law passed all forty-fives belong to the Sheriff?"

Tarbody's scowl deepened. He jerked out his hogleg with his right hand.

"I was tipped off yuh're rolling out with

whisky for the reservation."

Ney Larrigan laughed.

"Even you might have known that was a lie," he smiled. "Go ahead and search, if yuh feel like it."

Watching Ney, the Sheriff reached down and with his left hand jerked the tarp loose, flung it back, then looked down . . . and froze.

Ney grinned.

"Yuh look powerful disappointed, like those groceries are plumb shockin' to yuh," he jeered.

IN trembling tones the sheriff made a furious retort. "Just when he was going to let me have that loan," he cried.

Ney Larrigan stared.

"You loco, Tarbody? Yore talk don't make sense."

The sheriff backed his horse away from the wagon.

"Look in there. Don't try to get yore gun. I got yuh covered. That whisky tip was double talk for something else."

"You are crazy," insisted Ney. "Been smokin' loco weed, I reckon."

Tarbody looked dangerous with his hand.

Giving an impatient shrug, Ney strode to the wagon side, looked down into the wagon bed.

Larrigan stiffened, stared, passed a hand across his eyes as though to clear away a mirage and looked again. Yes, it was real, what lay there could not be brushed away . . . the body of a man who had been brutally murdered—Dan Larrigan.

Ney Larrigan's own hammer, blood stained, lay beside Larrigan's head.

A name leaped to Ney Larrigan's mind. Why did he think of Saw Sundry? Because Saw once was employed by Dan Larrigan, had been found out in a theft and had been kicked off the Box L.

The Whip Seven owner did not know this, but no doubt Saw dreaded the day when Dan Larrigan would spill what had happened. Saw had seen the run-in between Ney Larrigan and his uncle. Ney believed Sundry had committed this murder, realizing that opportunity and motive would be crushingly against Ney. Unless convicted of the crime, the murder would make Ney wealthy, but what is the use of wealth so obtained.

Ney Larrigan turned to the now slit-eyed sheriff and with fierce intensity declared that he believed this was Sundry's work. The man had made drunken boasts that some day he would "settle with Dan Larrigan." When sober, Sundry made no threats but he hated Ney.

The sheriff emitted a snarl.

"You're caught red-handed, Ney," he said. "Never mind Saw. Stand away from that wagon, so I can pick up yore gun. Make no mistake, Larrigan, if yuh try to escape, I'll break yore leg with a slug."

Time had passed.

Held on a charge of first degree murder, the man named to inherit the greater part of Buckthorn county paced his cell, raging up and down it in an effort to walk off some of the horror and fury possessing him.

He was direct, unquestionable heir to all Dan Larrigan's land and money. But of this inheritance he could not touch a cent until the will was probated, and that would be delayed until his innocence was proved.

Not that Ney Larrigan wanted to use a cent of Dan Larrigan's cash, regardless of surrogate law. If by a miracle he could be cleared of this death, if the murderer could be found and hanged, then the Larrigan inheritance might mean something. At present it was a glittering mockery.

Ney Larrigan had ten dollars of his own. That was all. It would not retain a lawyer and no one had offered to defend him. Public opinion was too bitter. Men's minds had too firmly fixed on Ney as the murderer of Dan. They believed they knew the motive. Those words are keys to death. Not in danger of legal death, Ney Larrigan knew he was in peril of being dragged out and lynched.

When he had wearied himself into composure, he realized he must accept this situation as he had accepted cyclones or stampedes on the range. By cleverness he must establish his innocence.

He started in by examining the jail cell inch by inch. Some former prisoner might have hidden a tool there.

He found no such treasure. Also the window bars were heavy, deeply set in.

BUCKTHORN was proud of its substantial jail. It was built of stone, from a nearby quarry. The walls were nearly two feet thick. The small, squat building had an appearance of strength.

In the corridor the walls had a roughly

smooth face, but in Ney Larrigan's cell the mason had been careless about the facing. The door was two-inch oak, reinforced with iron. Above it the door ledge measured three inches wide.

This cell and door would have seemed enough to dishearten any occupant. But Ney had hit bottom and began to bring all of his intelligence to bear on the problem of escape.

It was sunset now. As though preparing for sleep, despite lack of supper, Ney Larrigan took off his boots and his socks. For a time he sat regarding his toes, wiggling them in a thoughtful way. Then he hid his boots and socks under his cot. The sun died in blood colored clouds. Dusk fell. Ney Larrigan wiggled his toes and listened. He retained his cartridge belt with its empty holster.

Presently heavy, booted feet strode along the corridor. Ney Larrigan's memory identified the stride. Tarbody was coming for another look at his prisoner and most likely another interrogation.

Larrigan crossed the room, listening. Suddenly, using the occasional bumps with the agility of an ape, he swarmed noiselessly up the wall face for six feet, transferred his feet to the ledge. His bare toes clung to its edge, his fingers gripped the small protuberances above it. A hundred and seventy pounds of dynamite hung there, waiting.

Scowling and pompous, Tarbody felt satisfaction in coming to exult over his prisoner. He had questions ready to cover the real reason of his visit.

He was nearly at the door now. Further down the corridor the jailer slouched along with Ney Larrigan's plate of supper in one hand, a jug of water in the other.

The sheriff had the bunch of large keys. This arbitrary borrowing of official equipment had offended the jailer. He looked sullen. But he was afraid of the big, powerfully built sheriff.

No fear of his disarmed prisoner disturbed Tarbody because he had a drawn gun in his right hand. Approaching, Tarbody flung the door open. He uttered a roar of rage.

"Ney's gone."

This startled the jailer. He dropped plate and jug.

The sheriff, cursing, stepped into the cell, heading for the window where he thought bars must have been loosened. One hundred and seventy pounds of fighting manhood dropped astride his neck.

As Tarbody crashed on the floor, the jailer reached the door. The keys fell from Tarbody's fingers, winked, glittered.

Ney Larrigan knew the jailer must be close.

As the sheriff hit the stone floor, hard, face down, Ney leaped up from his body and sprang at the second man. Before the jailer could move, Ney Larrigan flung him into the cell, rushed after him and clipped him hard behind the ear.

The man went down loosely and lay still.

Satisfied the jailer was out, Larrigan returned to the sheriff and rolled him over. Tarbody was stunned and had a broken nose. Ney buckled on the sheriff's guns, thankful the one Tarbody had drawn had not gone off.

The cowboy gagged both men with their own shirts, which he ripped into with the sheriff's knife, handcuffed them together with the bracelets the sheriff always carried, and put on his own socks and boots. Then, keys in hand, he headed for the back door of the jail and the livery barn where his own horse was stabled.

A DEEPENING of dusk into night cloaked his movements. He slipped away from Buckthorn without incident. Then with a clear goal before him, he set out at a gallop. He had learned from the jailer that Saw Sundry had been fired from the Whip Seven and was now cooking for Douse Veer at Veer's ranch house. Ney Larrigan's plan was to force Sundry into a confession and have Douse Veer witness it. The cook would be sleeping apart in the cook shack. Not likely he would be off anywhere.

That Douse Veer would help him unmask Sundry, Ney did not doubt, but he wanted first to make sure Sundry was there. He did not want to let anyone else but Veer and Sundry figure in this matter. Larrigan reached Veer's ranch buildings in record time, for the bay proved to be fast.

The cookshack was empty. Ney Larrigan, refusing to be disappointed, studied the house, which he knew well. Upstairs in Douse Veer's bedroom the shades were drawn down, but he saw his cousin's profile on the shade. Presently another shadow crossed it, a shadow with the head turned confusingly away, yet looking somewhat like Saw Sundry.

Ney Larrigan took off his boots again. His horse waited some distance away, its head tied low to prevent neighing. The front door was unlocked as usual. No sound came from the bunkhouse. Ney slipped into the front hall.

Shadow light on his feet, he moved upstairs and went into the room next Veer's bedroom. There were no transoms in the house, but through a knot hole in a connecting door he could see as well as hear. Sundry was not there.

Veer and a man Ney Larrigan knew to be Cony Blastow, a tough hombre and reputed rustler, sat with a table between them. Lamplight winked and glittered on a pile of gold in the center. Blastow was speaking, his thick voice snarling.

"Yuh know blamed well yuh'd never have laid hands on them rustled cattle but for me. Third shares don't go with me. I want my half!"

Veer wore his usual light smile, but his pale eyes were narrowing. His hands lay on the table edge, graceful, slender hands.

Blastow's face had flushed. His expression grew menacing. He made a savage gesture.

"And now, I'm taking what's mine," he announced.

His fingers plunged into the gold, his eyes fed on it.

Douse's right hand flicked from the table edge, disappeared, reappeared, swift as the lick of a snake's tongue. The gun he brought up blazed.

Blastow started up, wavered, fell, gold raining from his fingers. Douse Veer leaped to his feet, flashed around the table and stood over Blastow with a cocked gun.

"Looks like I got to waste another slug on you, Blastow," he said. He smiled, but it was a deadly grimace.

The man lying on the floor threw up imploring hands.

"Don't shoot me again, Douse," he pleaded. "Yuh can have it all. Let me live."

"I think not, Blastow. You're less trouble dead. Where'd you like this finishing one?" Douse's tone had feral amusement in it, such as a snow leopard might feel playing with a wounded man.

"Douse!"

The hard, imperative tone made Douse Veer spin around. Ney had stepped from the curtains. Across the room the cousins stared at each other for a split second. Then Ney Larrigan ducked. Douse's lead, whistling through air where Ney's head had been, splintered through the door. As it went by, Ney fired.

Again Douse spun around, but this time from the force of the slug through his heart. When Larrigan got to him, he was already dead.

Holstering his gun, Ney turned to Blastow.

"I couldn't see him murder you in cold blood, hombre, though I was a fool to interfere," he said. He bent over Blastow, knelt by him, "Yuh hurt bad?"

"Bad enough," gasped Blastow. "Whisky."

A half emptied bottle stood by the gold. Ney brought the drink in one of the glasses, raised Blastow's head, fed him the liquor. Blastow, after the last mouthful, seemed stronger.

"Yuh come in handy for me," he remarked, "though I wish yuh'd shot him afore he downed me."

NEY LARRIGAN brought a coat and pillowed the man's head on its folds.

"I'm no murderer," he said. "I gave him his chance." Hastily examining Blastow's chest wound, he felt sure the wound would prove fatal. But when Blastow questioned him, Ney Larrigan said cheerfully. "Yuh're tough, hombre. Why shouldn't yuh recover?"

"Not unless I get a doc. Listen, feller, take that gold. It's yourn in exchange for fetchin' me a doc. Fetching him now." His bloodshot eyes widened with anxiety and terror.

"I can't do that, yuh've forgotten I'm branded as an escaped murderer. Anyone has the right to kill me on sight, Blastow. Now I really have killed someone. There's Douse dead!"

The wounded man tried to rise on an elbow, fell back.

"Ney, I'll play my trump card now. I know who murdered Dan Larrigan and why he done it. I can prove what I know. Doc Peters lives this side of the sheriff's home. Send him to me. I done him a favor once. He'll come. Then you roust the sheriff out, get him here. I'll tell him everything."

Still kneeling beside Blastow, Ney Larrigan looked piercingly into the dying man's eyes. He read truth there. Even so, agreement on Ney's part looked like premature death for him. Because the

sheriff hated him and would never believe him, and Ney did not believe any doctor could save Blastow. Even if the sheriff consented to come, it seemed likely they would find Blastow dead.

On the other hand, if Ney Larrigan ran for it, heading for Mexico, he had the pick of Douse Veer's stable and here was plenty of gold to keep him when across the border.

Either way lay incessant peril, but the way south would, in the end, mean Mexican exile and safety, while Blastow's offer pointed to almost certain destruction. But it was baited with the greatest word in the world to Ney . . . freedom!

Sheriff Whett Tarbody slept. His dreams reflected his waking life, in them he was the same violent, prejudiced, hot tempered man. He grumbled and tossed in his dreams, annoying his lanky deputy who shared the double bed, but who managed to get a troubled rest.

Neither of them stirred as a lithe, supple figure garnered their guns in the soft, dim moonlight drifting through the dusty windows. But when Ney Larrigan lighted the lamp on the table the yellow light against their lids awoke them.

Both sat up, with heavy, cavernous yawns. Both closed their unshaven jaws with a snap as the lamplight showed them the grim-faced cowboy who covered them with a gun. Both snarled in surprise.

"What do yuh want?" asked Tarbody.

"I'm aimin' to change things some," Ney Larrigan snapped. "You two are takin' a little *pasear* with me. The horses are ready. I've found the real murderer of Dan Larrigan. A wounded man will tell you the story, but he's worse hurt than he thinks and every second counts, so move fast."

"Where are my guns?" roared Tarbody.

"Where neither yuh nor Pilchard can get 'em. Out of that bed, into yore boots. Hurry!"

"It's a trap," rasped Tarbody. "Yuh want to hold me as hostage. I won't leave here, you killer."

A slug splintered the head board above him. The deputy leaped out of bed.

"I'm with you, Ney," he announced. "Anythin' yuh want. I'm yore man."

"Then stop where yuh are and pull on yore pants, Pilchard. Now, Tarbody?"

Ney finished the sentence with another slug. It crashed through the bedhead not two inches from the sheriff's ear. Several splinters stuck in his cheek. Pilchard let out a warning yell.

"Don't be a jughead, Tarbody," he cried. "Ney'd as soon kill yuh as not."

TARBODY thought so too. He tumbled out of bed. Cursing he pulled on his boots. He did not believe Ney Larrigan but there was no point in letting himself be made into a sieve.

He and the deputy had slept in shirts and drawers, dressing took little time but it seemed hours to the grim faced cowboy riding herd on them.

Five minutes later three riders thundered into the night. They rode hard. Ney Larrigan saw to that with a ready quirt. His captives were forced to ride just ahead of him. He had the fastest horse, and he had pointed out that any bolting from the trail would be remedied with his rope.

But if death chooses to move, he is faster than any horse. Already his skeleton fingers might have squeezed out the last of Blastow's breath, in spite of all the kindly and willing Doc Peters could do. Nothing had been said to Doc Peters about Douse Veer lying dead there. Better let him discover that after he arrived, or else he might refuse to go. What had he found there? Two dead men? Would Ney Larrigan be saddled with those two deaths?

When Doc Peters, under Ney Larrigan's frantic urging, tumbled out of bed and rode to Douse Veer's house at top speed, he made no bones of ignoring Ney's status as a fugitive. Doc was a law unto himself, made his own decisions.

Entering the room where he thought only a wounded outlaw lay, he threw a startled glance at the dead Douse Veer, and then turned his attention to the mortally wounded Blastow. He set himself to nurse the spark of life in Blastow. Peters tried to draw from Blastow the name of Dan Larrigan's murderer. The dying man stubbornly refused to give the information, but he did tell the story of the quarrel over the gold, of Ney's effort to save Blastow, and of Ney Larrigan's killing Veer in self defense.

"I'll never be able to keep the obstinate scoundrel alive until Ney gets here," thought the grizzled, sturdy little doctor. But he did his best, soothing and nursing Blastow along.

At last the sound of racing horses, of

steps on the stair, and of an opening door. Tarbody and Pilchard walked into the room, followed by Ney Larrigan with a cocked gun.

Tarbody shied like a frightened horse at sight of Douse Veer. Peters instantly took him in hand.

"I've got the truth about why Douse died, Sheriff," the medico said. "Main thing now is to hear Douse Veer's associate while he's conscious. Hunker down by him and speak to him easy. I've given him my last resource, a tremendous stimulant."

Peters' hypodermic sent powerful fluid into Blastow's arm. The rustler's eyes were closed but presently he opened them, grinned faintly at the anxious Ney Larrigan above him.

"Yuh kept yore word, feller," he whispered. "I'll keep mine. See you brought the Law right here to listen . . . So . . . I'm safe in talkin' . . . 'cause since yuh left, Ney, it come to me I'm going . . . shore . . . How long . . . doc?"

"Maybe half an hour, Blastow," Peters said gently. "Square your account while there's time . . . before Roundup."

"Ain't no Roundup . . . but Ney . . . he fought for me. Listen, Sheriff, Douse Veer was broke, cleaned out on that trip East, couple of months ago. When he heard Dan Larrigan warn Ney he'd change his will Sad'day if Ney didn't come to heel, Douse seen in a flash that if he could murder Dan and pin it on Ney, then have Ney lynched, all Dan's big fortune would go to Douse, who was next of kin to Ney."

"Yuh're lying," muttered Tarbody. Peters silenced him. Blastow went on, his voice growing astonishingly strong under the tremendous stimulant.

"Douse had to have help . . . me. But he killed Dan that night in the hotel, used the same sized hammer Ney had in his wagon. Luck ran with us. We smuggled the body out and into the wagon yard. We come in the back. The one lantern was burning low. Wheeler was snorin' in his office. Dan was small. Easy to hide him under Ney's tucked-in tarp. We knowed Ney'd drive out early and never bother to look over his supplies; nothin' was ever stole at Wheelers. Of course we bloodied Ney's hammer. And Douse tipped the sheriff off to that lie about Ney totin' whisky for the Reservation . . ."

The voice was growing weak, but Blastow finished clearly.

"That roll and that gold watch of Dan's that the sheriff said Ney must have cached somewhere afore the sheriff jumped his wagon," he said, "is right here in this room . . . wall safe . . . back of . . . w a r d r o b e . . . keys in . . . Douse's pockets . . . whisky . . . doc . . ."

While Peters administered more stimulant, Pilchard found the keys, opened the wall safe, and brought out conclusive evidence against Douse. The sheriff eyed it and appealed to Blastow.

"But how was Douse killed?"

RESOLUTELY the rustler faltered through what Ney Larrigan had seen and heard in the gold quarrel. Told how Ney Larrigan had tried to halt Douse Veer in murder and then had to kill in self defense.

"Why did Douse drill yuh?" growled Tarbody. "Couldn't he have come to some agreement about the gold? Wasn't you his associate?"

"'Sociate? Yeah. That's why he shot me. Dead men tell no tales." The dying man's voice had a bitter grimness. "Down in the place I'm goin' I'll find him and . . ."

The tones were cut by a convulsive movement as death seized him. Ney stooped and covered Blastow's face.

"No question but what you're plum cleared, Ney," he said. "Cleared and rich."

Ney Larrigan drew a deep breath of joy. Not over inherited wealth. But because his desperate fight for man's greatest riches, personal freedom, was won.

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Coming Next Issue

THE GUNSMOKY YEARS

A Quick-Trigger Action Story

By GUNNISON STEELE

As the lobo comes within range, Will's horse goes down and flips over

FANGS OF FREEDOM

By MEL PITZER

A Collie Dog Creates a Feud Between Will Yaeger, Owner of the Flying F, and Gail Sawyer, Pretty Girl Sheep Rancher!

ME BEIN' foreman of the Flying F, the boys generally come to me first with anything that's on their mind and I take it up with the boss.

This cold afternoon I'm workin' near the home ranch with a couple of my punchers puttin' new fence posts in a pasture, when two riders come lopin' up. One is Joe Aggers, who is supposed to be chasin' strays right this minute, but 'stead of that here he comes with one of the prettiest gals I ever laid eyes on. She was dressed in a gray flannel shirt and blue jeans that anybody could see was brand new. But she forked her kak with the grace of any bronc man. Trottin' along beside them was a big gold and white collie dog.

Now Joe reins up and turns to the gal. "Miss Sawyer, this is 'Carrot' Davis, the foreman. Carrot, this is Miss Gail Sawyer."

I give Aggers a look. He could have called me by my right name of Charley in front of such a pretty gal, instead of usin' the nickname my red hair gave me. But shucks, right quick I thought of my freckled, homely mug and figgered it didn't make any difference nohow.

Now while I notice that her dark eyes match her wavy hair, shiny as a raven's wing, she's talkin'.

"I wanted to see the owner of the Flyin' F, but this cowboy tells me I must consult you first," says she.

"Mind if I ask what it's about, ma'am?" says I.

"It's about the Martin ranch," says she, "that has been closed up for the past year. I've inherited it from my uncle and came out from the East to run it. I'm goin' to raise sheep. There's a thousand head of your cattle on acreage which I need. You'll have to take them off."

I put my Stetson, which I been fum-

blin' with, on my head and, turnin' to the boys, I tell 'em to go on with the work. Then I send Joe off chasin' strays. This here, I can see, is somethin' that young Will Yaeger, the owner, has to settle himself.

So we gallop off to the ranch with the big golden white collie streaking out ahead of us, flingin' a look back over his shoulder at the gal every once in a while, like as if he's tellin' her that everything is all right, seein' as he was along.

WE FIND Will Yaeger, the boss, comin' out of the blacksmith shop. He's a big, handsome, rangy gent with wheat-colored hair and eyes as blue as the sky this day. He's one swell hombre, I'm tellin' you. After I introduce them, this Miss Sawyer tells him the same story she told me with some elaboration, although I knew practically the whole thing.

Old Jake Martin, who owned the neighboring ranch, had been gettin' pretty feeble. A year ago he closed the place, after sellin' all his stock and said he was goin' to the city to live with a niece. The boss asked him if we could use eight hundred acres of his grassland which bordered our place. Martin said we could, until he sold the ranch or until whoever took it over came along. So we enlarged our herd by a thousand and ran 'em on the place. Now this Miss Sawyer comes along sayin' she wants it.

When she finishes her story, the boss frowns. "A mutton ranch? Yuh're goin' to bring in woolies? Why, ma'am, this is cattle country."

"I'm goin' to run sheep," says this Miss Sawyer again, and I can see her chin stickin' out stubbornlike. But I also notice that the boss's eyes are turnin' to that frosty color of a frozen lake like they do when he gets riled up.

"Yuh mind tellin' me why yuh're figgerin' on runnin' sheep, Miss Sawyer, when yore uncle was a cattleman?" he asks her.

"My father made his money in wool, Mister Yaeger," she answers. "He was a wool buyer and knew a lot of sheepmen. I got to know them and for years heard them talk about sheep. So I have resolved to raise some."

"But if I take my cattle off now, ma'am," says Will Yaeger, "I won't have grazin' room on my land. I'll be forced to sell at a bad loss."

"I'm sorry, Mister Yaeger," says the gal.

The boss's face hardens and he swings on me. "Carrot," says he, "get a couple of men and open the fence into the Martin pasture. Herd our beeves into Big Box Canyon and hold 'em there on our place while I go to town and make arrangements to sell to the Rafter H Syndicate. They'll take 'em off my hands. Anybody would that's practically gettin' a gift."

Yaeger turns to the gal once again. "Glad to have made yore acquaintance, Miss Sawyer," he says, sharplike, and turnin', he spur jingles down to the corral.

The gal rides off, while I lope out to do the boss's orders. A few minutes later I see Will Yaeger himself on his big geldin,' burnin' the wind to town and I know he's plenty mad.

It's a week later that we're comin' back from the Syndicate outfit, havin' sold our herd at an awful big loss. Will is still feelin' pretty sour over the whole thing. On the way back we decide to ride along inspectin' our line camps, makin' notes of what ones would have to be repaired for the comin' winter. After that we ride out of the hills and into a protected basin. We start checkin' up on the fences as we circle it an', turnin' down into a hollow, Will gives a shout and leaps from the saddle.

"A steer down, Carrot," he called. When I get to Will, shore enough, there's a beeve, his rear leg hamsrung and his throat opened up and all bloody.

"Some animal did that job," says the boss. I gives him an answerin' nod.

"Let's ride through these draws and see if there are any more." An hour later we found seven others down, hamstrung, and wallowin' in their own blood from ripped throats. We can see that some died days ago, and others was just killed recently.

"There's bad luck come down on us, Will," says I.

"Those are true spoken words, Carrot," says he. "I guess the best thing we can do is send some of the boys down to skin the cattle and tote back the best part of the meat to the smoke-house."

"We'll do that, boss," says I, "but by the jumpin' thunder there's certainly a

killer loose on this range. Wolves maybe or—"

"Or that dog that our new neighbor has," cuts in Will. "Maybe that collie has turned into a blood-drinkin' devil." The thought makes him hot-eyed and grim.

A BIT later we're ridin' out of the basin and have just come onto a brush-covered ridge when, from an outcrop of rock, something moves into view. We pull up our ponies and there is that golden white dog of the gals. But it ain't the appearance of the collie alone that makes Will stab a hand for the gun at his hip, it's seein' his muzzle an' head an' his fur here and there covered with red.

"There's yore killer," cries the boss. "There's yore beef-murderer, Carrot. It ain't the first time that a dog has gone loco and turned into a killer."

Well, when Will says this I'm pretty near convinced he's right. The first time he mentioned it, I didn't think the dog could've done it. I didn't want to make myself think that he could turn into a killer, because I had taken a likin' to that critter.

The dog stares at us for seconds and Will flips up his gun. The collie shows his fangs but he don't back up none. I thought the dog was a goner then, but Will shakes his head and holsters his Colt, and in that second there's a gold and white flash, and the animal is gone from sight.

"I could've drilled him, Carrot," says the boss now, "but still it's her dog and, though he's guilty, I'm goin' to give him the benefit of the doubt first. Anybody deserves that. Anyway, we'll ride over to the Sawyer place. I got a few words to say to the owner of a killin' hound like that."

Joggin' into the Martin ranch, the first thing we see near a waterin' trough is this Miss Gail, as pretty a picture as ever. But there she is, washin' the blood off the collie and rubbin' some stuff out of a jar on what I guessed was the dog's wounds.

Now Will pulls off his hat and goes right to the point.

"Ma'am, I hate to bother you, but my foreman and me, just a while ago, found a few of our cows that were hamstrung an' had their throats slit open," he tells her. "It was an animal that did it. Then we saw yore dog there near the spot. He was blood-covered. That dog is a killer, ma'am."

The girl jumps to her feet and faces Will. There's a flash to her eyes and her temper is breakin' loose as she cries out in protest.

"My dog isn't a killer, Mister Yaeger," she says. "I don't know who or what killed your cattle, but I know Goldy here never did. He's fallen over a cliff or fought with some wild animal. He never got so bloody from killin' cattle."

Then she stamps her little booted foot into the dust.

"Get off my land," she snaps out. "Both of you. Ever since I first laid eyes on you, Mister Yaeger, and talked with you, I knew that you lived with no other thought except how to make trouble for other people. You're a poor loser and you're tryin' to pick on anything to get back at me. Get off my property or I'll call some of my men to put you off."

The boss shrugs and gathers up his reins. "All right, ma'am," says he. "But it ain't in me to make trouble like yuh say. The way I see it, it's the other way around. Things have happened to me ever since yuh took over the Martin place and I'm givin' fair warnin' now that if I ever see yore Goldy on any of my acres again, I'll shoot him."

Will jerks his head at me and then we turn our mounts and pour back a cloud of dust, as we pull out of there.

For the next couple of days we were busy skinnin' the cattle and preservin' the meat. The day after this job was finished me and the boss decides to go over the basin once again to see if we had missed anything more. We're cuttin' through a bunch of low hills that borders the basin when we hear a howl from close by. Glancin' over to a swell of ground to our left, me and Will sees a big lobo wolf. It's late in the afternoon and the sun is just right so that I can see the gleamin' white of his big fangs. He gives another howl.

"A wolf, carrot!" says the boss. "Why, we ain't had any wolves around here since I can remember."

"Once in a while, boss," says I, "there's one that looks for new huntin' grounds. He'll leave the pack and put a hundred miles or so behind him. Maybe that crit-

ter is one like that. And there, boss, if you want my opinion, is the real killer of our beeves. Maybe we got that Goldy pegged all wrong."

THE wolf, suddenlike, gives a spring and then he's comin' swift as the wind right for us. Will unlimbers his six-gun. I never carry one as a rule when I got work to do out of the saddle. Too much weight hangin' on my frame. This time, as usual, I didn't have any.

"Carrot, that lobo is comin' at us," says Will. "Somethin' shore has riled him up that he's attackin' two men. You ride on to the basin there and I'll swing around an' head the other way. I'll get him to chase me because I got a gun and you ain't. I'll put some lead into him that'll stop him."

I could see that this was a good idea. So Will gallops off and the wolf swerves after him, like he thought it would. Well, I keep ridin' on slow to some woods and gullies where the basin starts. There I turn and watch what's goin' on.

Will had a good lead and I could see the flash of the gun in his hand. Just then it happens. As the lobo comes within six-gun range, Will's horse goes down and flips over, throwing the boss out of the saddle. He's tossed through the air one way, his gun goin' the other. Then the horse is up and is tearin' away, but Will is layin' there without movin'. At last he pushes himself to his feet and there he stands, kind of swayin'. And that wolf was almost upon him. There was nothin' to be done, even though I was rackin' my brain wonderin' how to help my boss.

Straight out from behind Will, where our pasture touches an alfalfa field owned by that Miss Sawyer, comes a streak of golden white like a bolt of lightning. It's that Goldy dog and right at that wolf he goes. The lobo skids to a stop for a minute, and in that minute Goldy has atttacked him. He flashes in at the wolf's belly and darts out again.

Now there ain't any dog what can stand up to a full-grown wolf, but I seen a lot of dogs in my time and owned a lot, and of them all a collie fights nearest like a wolf. He don't charge in and never backs up like the terrier breed, and he don't grab and hold on like a bull-dog. He feints in and out like a good boxer, waitin' until he sees the openin' for a knockout blow. That's what Goldy was doin' now, whirlin' and dancin', and feintin' and dartin' in and out, his teeth makin' a slash where they could. That lobo was playin' that game, too, but he wasn't half as fast.

After a while I could see that there was some red gettin' mixed into Goldy's color and the streak that had been him began to slow up. The wolf was missing less an' less an' I knew that pretty soon the end of the collie would be at hand.

That's when I heard the loud crash of the gun and there was Will, standin' spread-legged and thumbin' the hammer of his big forty-five. The wolf gave a leap high into the air and rolled over a couple of times, his jaws snappin' at the air. After that he didn't move.

Goldy he gave a look at Will and then turnin', came at a slow, down-headed, droopin' tailed trot toward the basin. A hundred yards below me he disappeared into some brush. But I could see that the dog was pretty well tooth-slashed and done in.

After that I got myself goin' an' rode out to the boss.

"The dog saved yore life, Will," says I. "After this I'm sure goin' to carry a gun with me. There wasn't nothin' I could have done quick enough if he hadn't mixed in."

Will wiped the sweat from his face.

"That sure was a close one, Carrot," he mutters, "I guess that Goldy dog did sort of stretch the span of years for me. Carrot, go round up my horse, will yuh. We'll ride on into the basin and have a look around for any other damage that that wolf might have done, if it was the wolf."

"Doggone it, boss," I says then, "what do yuh mean, if it was the wolf? It couldn't have been nothin' else but him."

"Maybe the dog figured the wolf was tryin' to cut in on his territory," says Yaeger now. "The lobo might've just come into this part of the country and that Goldy wanted to keep him out."

"Boss," says I, "yuh shore are the stubbornest gent I ever met. In all these years I worked for yuh I never heard of such talk. Why, yuh might give me my walkin' papers for sayin' it, but once yuh get an idea into that head of yourn, yuh shore never let it go. I'd stick up for that Goldy before I would any doggone wolf."

WILL YAEGER nods. "Maybe yuh're right," says he. "Maybe yuh're right, Carrot."

"I know I'm right," says I. "It's just that yuh're lettin' that pride of yourn take hold of yuh. Yuh figger that if Goldy didn't do the killin' that Miss Gail Sawyer would be right and yuh don't want her to get the best of yuh."

Well, Will didn't say much after that, but I could see that he was doin' a powerful lot of thinkin'. He knew I had come close to hittin' the nail on the head.

We don't find any more cattle butchered, so we turn back. Then passin' a heavy growth of brush, our horses shy and start actin' up and blowin' through their nostrils.

"Somethin' in there," says Will. We slide from the saddle and with Will leadin', his six-gun ready, we push through into an open glade. There we see the furry body. It's all chewed an' blood covered. Will leans down and picks up a piece of leather nearby. Lookin' at it we see the name Goldy printed on it. Right then and there I tell Will just what I think, and finally he agrees with me about the whole thing.

"We'll take the body along with us," he ends up. "Throw it over yore saddle, Carrot. It'll make what I'm goin' to say more convincing to Miss Sawyer."

We found Miss Gail on the porch of her ranch house. She looked worried. Then Will starts talkin'. His face was red and he had a hard time gettin' the words out, but he always was the kind of a gent who admitted when he was wrong.

"Miss Gail, I came over here to apologize for the fool way I been actin' and for the things I been sayin' about yore dog," he says. Then Will goes on to tell her how Goldy saved his life. When he finishes, he backs his horse up so she can see better what I'm carryin'. "Yuh see, Miss Gail," he goes on, "me and Carrot here, we found this half-growed wolf over in the basin. We figger it's the whelp of the lobo that attacked me. The day we first found my butchered steers and met Goldy all bloody, that was the day he must've met this here young wolf and killed him. At that time I thought it was my steers he had butchered. I can see where I'm wrong and yuh're right, Miss Gail. Here's Goldy's collar we found layin' by the body of the whelp. From now on I'm willin' to play my cards with yore dog."

The gal took the collar from Will and says:

"That's the way it must've been, Mister Yaeger. I remember that day he came home without his collar. When he came back to the ranch a couple of hours ago, I couldn't understand how he got all slashed up again. I telephoned the veterinary and he's inside now doctorin' Goldy. He says Goldy'll be all right."

From then on Will spent a lot of time over to the Sawyer place with Goldy and Miss Gail, until one day he calls me over.

"Carrot, we're changin' the name of the outfit," he says. "It's goin' to be recorded as the Sawyer and Yaeger Cattle and Sheep Company, all under one brand."

"Boss," says I, "yuh mean to tell me that you and Miss Sawyer is plannin' to get hitched?"

"Right, Carrot," he grinned.

"Well," says I, "bein' the foreman, I guess I got a right to kiss the bride first."

"You have," Will chuckled.

And I did.

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

Bucko jumps on Slim's back like you'd jump on a hoss

BORROWED HOSSES

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Bucko and Gumbo, Those Comedy Cowpunchers, Are on Pins and Needles When They're Stuck with a Badge and Eight Outlaw Nags!

THE minute I seen that shiny, nickel-plated badge Bucko had picked up outa the dust of the road, I had a real live hunch it was goin' to get us in plenty trouble. He had handed it to me with the sly-like remark:

"See what's writ on it, Gumbo! 'Stock Association Detective.' Now I'll just pin on this yere badge and—"

'Twas time for me to snort a protest and I done so: "But you ain't no detective and your nor me ain't got no backin' from the Stock Association, so don't you—"

Bucko Brewster snatches the shiny badge outa my short fingers. Even though I'm on my hoss and he's afoot, he don't have to reach far, 'count of because he's about as long as a lariat rope and not much thicker through neither. Uh-huh, he's the kind o' buckaroo whose feet wander around in the sagebrush when he's astraddle a little

pony. As for me, Gumbo, I kinder go to t'other extreme. When I'm well-fed my mid-section fits snug into a sixteen-inch saddle tree. Not that I've been well-fed for longer'n I can remember. When the whistle blows at twelve o'clock, its dinner time for some folks; but just twelve o'clock for me.

Bucko waves my entreaties to one side and pins that do-dangled badge on his ragged vest. That vest don't need no pockets, for he ain't nothin' to carry in 'em; he slaps hisself on his flat chest, important, and struts to his leg-weary nag.

"Gumbo," says he, climbin' aboard, "folks is goin' to be mighty respectful to an S. A. dick. Never neglect opportunities as kick you right in the kisser, pardner."

We mosey on toward the little cow town which squats on a hill plumb surrounded by sagebrush flats. But away in the distance on three sides of this burg are foothills and green valleys, and beyond 'em mountains. Them rugged, big ol' he-mountains like you see in Colorado with scarred ridges, timbered slopes, dark canyons and saw-toothed peaks liftin' up and up to the blue sky itself.

Howsoever I ain't interested none in the scenery. Just as I thunk, this goofy, rope-necked and tack-headed pard o' mine is figgerin' to make use, or rather misuse, of that badge, and from past experiences I re'lize all the arguin' I can boil outa me won't change his mind, if any.

AT THE edge of town, stuck up to attract the traveller's eye, is a new billboard announcin' Pindell's Big Celebration on the Fourth of July. Bucko stops to read the hull thing, though it ain't nothin' to us, 'count of because there ain't no contest listed as we could win at even if we had entrance fees, which we ain't.

"Five-hundred-dollar purse for the bronc-ridin' contest," says Bucko, his frizz-up, crow-foot-tracked eyes glowin'. "That's real dough, by Hinkey's pup! 'Twould be of interest to a coupla old pals I know. Might even be a mite of commission comin' our way."

"'Tain't of no interest to me," I yelps sour. "On to the first saloon. That is, if you still got our six bits left?"

"I still got it so far," says Bucko, and we amble along down Main Street as far as Helfinger's Beer Parlour, where we ground-hitch our nags.

Fair dyin' o' thirst, I dive in through the door and line myself up at the bar. Only a couple of ranchers is there, settin' at a little table, and the bartender. He sez, "What'll it be?" and I look around for my pard, wishin' I had our joint capital, 'stead o' him.

"Jus' a minute, Barkeep," says I.

But it's full five or maybe ten minutes afore old Bucko saunters in, lookin' pleased as a fat hoss that's just unloaded a cowpoke eleven miles from the wagon.

"I've been sendin' a telegram, and a danged important one," he announces, fingerin' his new badge so as them ranchers'll be sure to see it.

"Telegram? Oh, ye-ah?" I spit dry-like. "How about a couple of nickels for beer?"

"All out of loose change," returns Bucko, stickin' his thumbs in the armhole of his vest. "Fact is, I'm busted till a check comes through from the Association."

Which means he has spent our last six bits. What the high-flyin' grasshoppers would he send a wire for, and who to? I jus' glower at the long-legged galoot. But immejitly one of them ranchers gets to his short legs and waddles over to us. He's an oldish feller with a fringe of white hair under his white hat, and a strong, chopped-off face not much prettier'n a bulldog's.

"Might I ask if any especial business brought you boys here?" he inquires of Bucko, eyein' the badge respectful-like.

Bucko says, "We-el," and stops and looks wise as an old owl, which causes the rancher to say real quick he didn't mean to be inquisitive, but he sort of wanted to know if we could take on a little job for him for a short spell.

Bucko—and though I get powerful mad at that hombre I always find myself admirin' his actin' ability—seems to consider this. He clears his throat.

"We-el, there ain't no yank about the job we're now on," he allows. "We might, just *might*, consider your proposition, sir."

Mister Rancher is just about to shake on the deal, when he gazes toward the

door and a black scowl wipes the pleased expression off his face. A newcomer just entered—a big, red-faced, beefy feller who stares at our friend for a jiffy afore he smacks his thick lips and grunts:

"My mistake, Mason. Didn't know you and your foreman were in here. I'll get a drink somewheres else even if there ain't any somewhere's else." Out he goes.

The Barkeep chuckles and comments, "My gosh, Tom Mason, you and old Hardscrabble Jones sure love still one another!"

"Hardscrabble's an ornery, underhanded sonofagun," says the rancher we now know to be Tom Mason. "He'd give his right eye to see my TM outfit get it in the neck at this forthcomin' celebration—or any other time. Boys," to me and Bucko, "this is my foreman, Pete Winkler. Join us at this table and we'll talk business."

My tonsils lit up like the jackpot on a pinball machine.

CONFAB result was as follows.

Due to the badge and the false impression it'd made on Tom Mason, me and Bucko ride out to the TM ranch that same evenin'. The ranch is in the rough foothills due west of town some fifteen miles. Gettin' to it we ford a sizeable stream, the Warrior River, which flows south from the high mountains on the north.

Howsoever it's back up in the hills a mile from the TM ranch buildings where Bucko and me take up our new job. All we got to do is ride close herd on a fenced pasture to see that no doggoned thieves swipe the hosses outa said pasture. Only eight head of hosses.

But they're all outlaws, the hosses which Tom Mason is going to furnish the town of Pindell for its big bronc-riding contest. Old Tom sets great store by them nags, he gives us to understand.

Tom Mason also told us he ain't much worrit about any trickery or dirty work, but when he saw a couple of Association Dicks he just 'lowed 'twould be a good thing to safeguard them valuable hosses, for he has suspicions he don't care to disclose.

Since there's a shanty in the pasture with a bed, a stove and plenty grub, it looks like us pards is settin' atop the world. After Mason has gone and after we have fried us some supper, Bucko takes off his badge and looks at it admirin'.

"Gumbo, old gloom-hound," says he, "you now see what comes of usin' your think-tank and of never neglectin' opportunity. Suppose you take the night shift and I'll relieve you at sunup."

I won't stand for no such arrangement without argument. So we have a freeze-out game to decide who'll ride herd on them hosses by day and who by night. For oncet I win and Bucko has to take the night shift.

I sleep sound, but day ain't much more'n broke when the singin' of robins and meadow larks wakes me up and I step out to take a look-see 'round the country. Two minutes later I'm saddlin' my bronc, then I'm foggin' down the valley to where I see Bucko's noble mount standin' tied to an aspen. But *his hoss and mine are the only nags in that pasture!*

That long-eared, long-jawed pard o' mine admits how toward midnight he decided there was no sense in his stayin' awake, doin' nothin' out there in the dark. So he bedded down in his saddle blanket, the kind of bed he's used to, and—

Salty Cow! How I scorch that gazoob with sizzlin' remarks about cowboys who neglect their duty, snooze on the job, and allow valuable hosses to be stole right under their noses. Furthermore, without Bucko's noticin' it I manage to get hold of that daggoned badge as got us into this mess and jab it deep into my pocket. Lotta good luck that nickel-plated trinket brung us so far!

WHEN at last I convince him the hosses are gone, he says, "'Twould be humiliatin' for us to report this to the boss. So we'll trail the herd and— Come on, worthless. If *you'd been awake* this couldn't have happened!"

Mighty soon we discover where the fence has been opened, the hosses driv out and the fence put up again. The tracks of the broncs are plain to follow across the foothills. Bimeby we come to Warrior River, where on the far side of the ford the hoss tracks lead on, headin' toward Pindell. But right here

I've got to take off my shako to old Bucko. He unfolds himself down from his saddle like a jacknife to examine them tracks real close, and shakes his head.

"By Hinkey's pup! It's a trick, Gumbo, and a clever one."

"Huh? What's a trick?"

"These tracks on this side the river wasn't made by the same hosses we've been trailin'."

That floors me until Bucko explains further, "Men was waitin' here in the river. They had extra hosses with 'em. When our hoss thieves 'rived at this ford, they either turned the broncs they stole upstream or down, and the hombres who met 'em here rode outa the water on this far side to make a false trail."

"Then there was a lot o' men in on this deal!"

"Looks that way. I suspect them crooks rode on to town where their trail will vanish plumb, and it's a cinch we won't find the stolen broncs in town."

"The thieves figgered on us followin' the false trail to town?"

"Shore pop they did. But Bucko Brewster, Stock Association dick—Where the blazes is my badge?—is too smart for 'em. Must ha' lost that badge. That's bad. Bad. It shore was a good luck emblem. Gumbo, we'll go upstream."

"But why? I can't see no tracks leadin' up nor down."

"Open and settled country downstream while its rough and unsettled upstream. Naturally the thieves would head into rough country. Let's ride."

Somehow I ain't got no enthusiasm for that hoss hunt. But I can't desert Bucko, who's ridin' upstream as cool as a cucumber.

Three-four miles up-country the hills close in and the river canyons, and here we discover sure enough we're on the right trail. A couple of them broncs had got out on the bank, tryin' to turn back. Evidently they hadn't got away from the riders, and evidently they had been driv' on up the gorge in swift water tumblin' over big rocks.

Me and Bucko have a dozen baths afore we get through that rushin' stretch of water even tho it ain't Sattiddy. We're shore chilled, numb, wet, cold, when unexpected we come out to an open park surrounded by high wooded hills. We climb out on the river bank and stop to stare.

Over yonder against the bluff is a set of pole corrals, and near the corrals a camp with a streamer of wood smoke liftin' into the still air. In the little park are three saddled horses grazin' with trailing bridle reins. In the corral are eight head of broncs—the Tom Mason outlaws we'd lost. At the camp two men are eatin' their breakfast.

So much I see just as Bucko whispers terse, "We got to get back outa sight. Quick."

"Aw, just stand hitched!" snaps a voice behind us.

Outa the tail of my right eye I see a man rise up from behind a big rock with a Colt .45 in his fist, and I jus' naturally freeze. Nor do I see Bucko makin' any hostile move. He replies calm enough though:

"All right, pardner, we'll stand hitched."

ONLY a few minutes later, our nags, like the thieves' saddle hosses, are bein' allowed to graze, while me and Bucko, minus our guns, are bein' made welcome at the camp. So far as I can see there are only three men present, the one who stuck us up bein' the boss. A husky, red-headed gent with frosty eyes, he wishes to know if anybody else has found their trail.

Bucko looks wise and innocent as he replies, "What trail? Me an' my pard is jus' a couple of travellers seein' the country. I reckon this is a range camp and you fellers is range riders. How 'bout breakfast?"

But them three, Shorty and Slim and Red, as I dub 'em, ain't interested in feedin' "chance travellers." They figger we're after them Mason hosses, which they say ain't stolen, just borrowed.

"Though we don't want that to be knowed yet for a spell," says Red. "You *travellers* good riders?"

Afore I can stop him Bucko announces modest that we're a couple of the plumb best hoss breakers and bronc riders that ever scratched high, wide and handsome. Slim and Shorty wink at one another, and Red says he'll give us a chance to prove how good we are. Me, I'm swallerin' hard at every word he says, as I can feel somethin' comin'.

Cuttin' details short, me nor Bucko don't neither one of us stay longer'n two-three seconds atop any one of them eight outlaw hosses old Tom Mason has been gettin' together for use as buckin' stock in Wild West contests. We sure get the hoss laugh from Slim, Shorty and Red not to mention what happens to my bones, back and insides. But though we can't fork them broncs, *neither can they!*

Shorty and Red, I gather, are bronc busters and the kind of waddies who hire out to ride rough strings, and say, man! are those hombres mad and disgusted when they find they can't set Tom Mason's broncs!

Shorty, who's a black-headed jigger built like a grizzly bear, spits; "I'll wear 'em down and larn their tricks yet so as I can set 'em, by grab."

"You got to work fast," Red points out. "Tomorrow's the Fourth."

And still I don't catch on to what these rannies are up to. So far they ain't never relaxed their vigilance enough for Bucko and me to make a break. One or another of 'em is always ridin' close herd on us with a business-like lookin' smoker in his fist. I might add as how the three force me and Bucko to rope them broncs for 'em and wool 'em down to where we can tie their front feet together, blindfold 'em and saddle 'em.

We has been workin' like slaves and sweatin' our boots full. On top of that we're all sored up, skinned and bruised from havin' been piled our own selves. We ain't been fed neither. Them hoss "borrowers" is kinda rubbin' it in.

All of which makes me plumb willin' to overlook it when at last Bucko forgets to tighten a cinch like it should be tightened to hold a saddle on a buckin' hoss. Shorty overlooks that loose cinch too.

Consequent he gets dumped, saddle and all, right down in front of eleven hundred pounds of snortin', fightin'-mad bronc. Because the bronc tromps him a couple of tromps afore he dashes across the corral, Shorty lays where he's fallen makin' out number one. Then both Red and Slim so far forget about me and Bucko as to run to their pardner and bend over to help him. Seems like Old Man Opportunity is knockin'.

Bucko, who has got hold of a shot-loaded quirt, nudges me. I'm always kinda discreet in a fight, so I grab a rope and drop it around Slim's neck and pull like sixty. Slim's so danged busy fightin' that noose he drops his gun. But next thing I know he's got a-hold of me. That lanky hombre is makin' a mop outa me when fortunate-like, Bucko rushes into the scrap.

Disregardin' all ethics, which is a habit of hisn in a scrap, Bucko had busted the butt end of his quirt over Red's skull, puttin' that big bruiser out cold which was out number two. Now Bucko jumps on Slim's back like you'd jump on a hoss, and begins chokin' the breath outa the feller. That ends the fight abrupt, for Shorty's still helpless. Three out allus retired the side when I played the game.

PANTS Bucko; "These pore misguided idjuts'll be more comfortable in the hoosegow at Pindell. We'll take 'em there, Gumbo. Y'understand I never was in doubt of the outcome," he adds with his usual modesty.

"Wasn't you? Well, I was. Let's make tracks."

We tie up them jiggers, load 'em on their gentle hosses, straddle our own nags, and, leadin' them as our prisoners, head east toward Pindell. Climbin' a steep slope, we come out atop a ridge, and here, outa sight of the little park, Slim begins to beg us to let him and his pards go.

"We ain't real hoss thieves," says he. "We was goin' to return them Mason hosses tonight. 'Course I won't mention who helped us rannies to get 'em and left that false trail."

"No?" chuckles Bucko. "Why-for did the hombre back of you boys, have you steal them Mason hosses, hey?"

"'Twas 'count of the bronc-ridin' contest at Pindell," Slim explains. "For gosh sakes, tall feller, have a heart and don't take us in."

"Oho!" Bucko whistles. "'Count of the bronc-ridin' contest, hey! I savvy the drift. Just local men roundabouts Pindell enter that contest?"

"Uh-huh," agrees Slim, "and the big rivalry is atween the H R J and the T M; Tom Mason and Hardscrabble Jones hatin' each other so like pizen."

"And you three goofs work for Hardscrabble?" my pard inquires.

Slim admits, reluctant-like, that such

is the case. Whereupon I sings out, proud of my deductive ability, "I get it, Bucko! If Shorty and Red could learn to ride Mason's outlaws by practisin' on 'em, they'd sure win that contest."

"Dumb as you are, Gumbo, I· sorta thought you'd catch on, give you time enough," said Bucko dry. "We-el, these thieves has made the mistake of tanglin' with a great S. A. dick. But say, we really oughter take the Mason broncs to town for evidence."

"So we had," I agree, even though Slim's pleas are kinda meltin' my heart. "We'll get them hosses."

Tyin' the nags of our three helpless prisoners to separate t r e e s, me and Bucko head back to the little park. Bucko has stepped down from his saddle to open the corral gate when a command rings out behind us:

"Freeze and stay froze, hoss thieves!"

Three men rise from behind boulders, all three coverin' us pards with six-guns. One gent is Tom Mason, another his foreman, Pete Winkler, the third the T M choreman who we had seen at the ranch yesterday evenin'.

In all my born days I never seen a colder-eyed, grimmer-faced crew. And it looks mighty like all the talkin' Bucko can do—ain't goin' to convince old Tom Mason he hadn't ought to hang us immejit. Seems that snorty ol' rancher thinks *we* stole them eight hosses! How could we when he is payin' us to guard 'em?

YET at last Bucko prevails on the three proddy cowmen to go up on the ridge where we can show 'em the crooks who did steal the hosses. But, Salty Cow! At the place where me and Bucko had left three cowboys tied to their hosses' backs and the hosses tied to pines, nothin' is in sight. Worse still, if that's possible, the ground's so danged rocky there ain't no hoss tracks to show any hosses had been there nor which way they went.

"That settles the argument," bellers Mason. "You birds are just plain liars. You stole my horses. Where's your badge, Mr. Bucko Brewster? You ain't wearin' it today. I now suppose that you stole it from a real S. A. detective you two tough nuts probably murdered."

Evidence is pilin' up in his own mind, all of which could be true.

Bucko mourns, "I lost my badge and with it all my good luck. By the way, Mr. Mason, you got any cowboys on your spread who can ride these outlaws of yourn?"

"No, I haven't. And do I wish I had!" rasps the rancher. "Back to the corral, boys. We'll leave these two tricky buzzards ornamentin' the cross-beam of the gate."

There was a wild scramble by them rannies for to find a rope.

"Steady, steady," says Bucko. "Now if you had a couple of real riders who could sit your outlaws, you could win a heap of jack in Pindell, Mr. Mason. By Hinkey's Pup, you could take that dirt-mean, underhanded Hardscrabble Jones to a cleanin'."

"So I could," old bulldog Mason raps out, doin' some thinkin'. "But I don't believe for a minute that Hardscrabble was low-down-mean enough to be responsible for the theft, as you, Bucko, trying to get out of this mess, have declared."

"How do you account for the false trail I told you about, sir?" Bucko inquires.

"A herd of cattle had crossed at the ford on Warrior River by the time Winkler and Jess and I got there. We saw no false trail. We followed up the river on nothin' stronger'n a hunch and nabbed you red-handed with the goods. Humn? It's mighty plain to see from the looks of the horses, cinch marks, sweaty bodies and so on, that you two have been practicin' ridin' 'em. Can you ride 'em?"

Can we ride 'em! According to Bucko—remember he's talkin' or rather lyin' for our very lives—there ain't a hoss in the whole bunch but what either one of us can ride to a finish, sidewise and blindfolded if necessary. I'm holdin' my breath, thinkin' nothin' will come of all this oratory. But by crackies, my ol' pard makes an impression on both Mason and Pete Winkler.

Yep, Pete Winkler slaps his leg. "Tom, with these boys as our ace in the hole at that bronc-ridin' contest we can make old Hardscrabble take water."

"And how!" says Tom Mason.

OUTA the fryin' pan into the fire! By noon of the followin' day me and Bucko ain't had no least chance to fan the breeze. Indeed not! Tom Ma-

son has taken us and all his cowboy crew to Pindell where the cowboys turn the outlaw hosses over to the celebration committee.

We're out at what serves as an arena and racetrack for Pindell when nobody but Hardscrabble Jones shows up, bold as brass, like nobody has got nothin' on him for hoss-stealin'. "Hi there, Tom Mason. You got any jack as says your outfit'll win this buckin' contest?"

Now me and Bucko ain't tied, and though we ain't got no guns, we look like we're there of our free will. Yet three-four cowboys are hoverin' close around us all the time as well as old Tom Mason hisself.

Bucko speaks to him real quick in a whisper:

"Don't you bet Hardscrabble your outfit'll win. Don't you do it, Mason. Bet him his outfit won't win. Savvy? *His outfit won't win.*"

Why Bucko made him put the bet that way, I couldn't see at the time.

Old Bucko's generally one mighty cool customer, yet I can see he's sorta sweatin' blood. Me, I've sweat all my blood plumb away even afore this crisis. Bucko has bragged we can ride them Mason outlaw hosses, which we just naturally can't do!

Tom Mason hesitates and at last says, "Hardscrabble, I've got gobs of jack as says your triflin' run-down-at-the-heel outfit *won't* win. Get it—that your outfit won't win."

"So-o?" Hardscrabble eyes me and Bucko, it bein' plain to me he has larnt all about us from his men. Later I find out from Slim how 'twas Hardscrabble himself who rescued them three cowboys, Slim and Shorty and Red. "So-o? You got some new riders I know nothin' about, Mason?"

"I'll admit it. These two boys you see here'll ride for the old TM."

"Well, I ain't a-scairt of them," opines Hardscrabble Jones kinda poker-maskin' his face. "How much dough can you dig up, Mason?"

Tom Mason leaves us while he lopes 'round to the bank and signs a note to get five thousand smackers. If he loses that wad it'll leave him bad crippled, foreman Pete Winkler lets us know. We got to come through for the old man, says Pete, or— He unties his rope and monkeys with it in a manner that's powerful significant. Dumb as I am, I savvy them motions!

I GET Bucko's ear and let him know under my breath, if there was any way of doin' a sneak outa there, I'd sneak. As 'twas, I jus' hoped the hoss I got to ride killed me plumb daid.

Mason and Hardscrabble get their bet all fixed. Mason makin' sure the other one got the wordin' straight. The stakes was placed with a neutral party, and then all t'oncet, much too soon to suit me when prayin' for heaps of delay, the contests are on. A couple of races, some calf ropin', and then the bronc-ridin' contest. Goose pimples were breakin' out on me before they even brought in them hosses.

Red and Shorty are entered for Hardscrabble's outfit. Ye-ah, them two and Slim are right on hand. Probably old Hardscrabble has told 'em to set tight and lie like hoss traders if anybody dares to accuse 'em of stealin' hosses.

Me and Bucko are entered for the TM and that's all the contestants so far except another gink from a one-hoss outfit who gets piled up quicker'n a hornet can sting you. Doggoned if my name ain't called next. I got to get outa there and ride Mill Iron, a Mason hoss, o' course. Couldn't ha' rode a hobby-hoss, the way I felt.

"Keep a stiff lip and ride like tarnation, Gumbo," says Bucko to me. "I ain't lost all hopes yet," his eyes rovin' here and there and everywhere. "We'll win if only we can glue ourselves onto these hosses for a second longer'n Red or Shorty can stick. It's a cinch every contestant is goin' to get piled, unless — Well, aich-you-boy! There they come at last!"

I can't see why he yelps, "Aich-you-boy!" and wasn't interested. But then I'm bein' drug away from him anyhow and drug out to the center of the arena where four men are saddin' a wild hoss for me, Pindell having no saddlin' chute. Anything to make it harder.

All too soon I'm up in the middle of that hoss and a darned sight sooner the ground rises up and smacks me in the kisser. With the grandstand whoopin' and howlin' and jeerin', I pick myself up and coot over to the corral, tryin' to get outa sight and wishin' I could find a gopher hole to drop into and pull said

hole in after me.

But strangely, here at the corrals Tom Mason nor his foreman nor his waddies ain't payin' me no attention, the reason bein' there's a red-hot argument goin' on. Presently I get hep to what 'tis. A couple of riders from outside has appeared plumb unexpected and has entered this bronc-ridin' contest. Hardscrabble Jones is bellerin' his head off to get 'em barred.

They're professionals, these newcomers, who make all the little shows roundabouts. Hardscrabble has heard of 'em, Flash Karns and Bill O'Neil. So has Tom Mason. But Tom, rememberin' how he has bet, also just havin' seen how one of his riders bit the dust almost afore the hoss got unwound, ain't kickin' none about these yere professionals ridin' in Pindell. I'll say he ain't. Hardscrabble likewise has doubtless remembered how *he* bet; that *his* outfit'll win! His yelpin' gets him nothin'. The committee announces that Flash and Bill are welcome to ride.

I see ol' Hardscrabble turn on Mason then, his red face jus' like a raw beefsteak. "You pernickity tricky cuss, you got them fellers here."

Mason yells, "I didn't! What's that you called me?" and he climbs Hardscrabble's frame. This fight brings every contestant and every hazer and judge and cowpuncher in the arena or at the corrals or anywhere near on the dead run. They all pile up eleven deep around them two snorty ol' ranchers who're hammerin' away at each other.

Suddent I feel Bucko beside me

(Continued on page 88)

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ERSKINE CALDWELL

The Sinews of War

By ERSKINE CALDWELL

Famous Novelist and Author of the story on which the hit play "Tobacco Road" was based

I WATCHED the Russian people generate an all-out offensive against the German Army during the first six months of war in the Soviet Union.

While the Red Army was meeting the full force of Hitler's military power at the front, the people of the country considered themselves equally responsible for the safety of their homeland. Factory workers and farm laborers gave up their eight-hour day and spent ten and twelve hours at their jobs.

Clerks, secretaries, doctors, teachers, students, and children placed themselves at the disposal of the State on Sundays and performed whatever tasks were allotted to them.

Citizens with such possessions as automobiles, radios, and bicycles offered them to the Red Army for military use. Those who possessed precious stones, gold, and silver, turned them over to the State as contributions to help meet the cost of war.

In addition to all that, the people bought government bonds as fast as the State printing presses could turn them out.

I know one Russian, a resident of Moscow, who had a large collection of American money which he had succeeded in gathering over a long period of time as a hobby; one of his first acts when war began was to invest it in Soviet government bonds.

Russians have a high regard for Americans. Next to themselves, they consider Americans to be the smartest, the most productive, and the most admirable people on earth.

I was asked many times while I was in the USSR if Americans supported their government as wholeheartedly as the Russians did theirs by buying war bonds. I always replied that when the time came Americans would dig as deep into their pockets as any people on earth. Invariably, the Russians nodded knowingly, as if to say they knew that all the time.

I have been back in the United States for several months, most of my time being spent in traveling across the country, and I often unconsciously compared Americans-at-war with Russians-at-war.

Americans, I have concluded, could easily buy

a lot more War Stamps and Bonds than they are buying, because they have far more to buy them with than the Russians have. In this respect, I believe the Russians are outstripping us; and the only way we can keep up with them is to buy more stamps and bonds, and to buy them oftener.

The Russians believe in their government bonds and they do not hesitate to back up their belief by buying all they can. Americans feel that our government bonds are the best investment in the world, but many of us fail to take advantage of our opportunities merely because we put off doing from day to day what is not a hardship at all, but a rare privilege.

We do not realize what a privilege it really is.

There are millions of persons in the Axis-occupied countries of Europe and Asia who would give anything to be able to invest their money in U. S. War Bonds, rather than see their wealth being taken away from them by Germany and Japan.

Americans, fortunately, are in the enviable position of being able to buy a stamp or bonds at almost any hour of the day or night on practically every street corner and crossroad in the United States.

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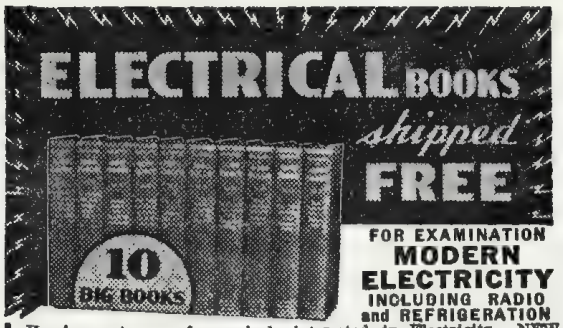

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BORROWED HOSSES

(Continued from page 85)

pluckin' at my sleeve real urgent. I'd ha' stood 'round there like a wooden Injun all day if it hadn't been for him. Treadin' fast, he leads the way around behint the corrals where our ponies are tied with a lot more nags. We fork them ponies and fade away from Pindell jus' as fast as we can send them ol' nags.

Soon we're out on a road leadin' to places elsewhere, with clear sailin' ahead when all t'oncet a dust cloud rises to rearward, and, under the dust, we see horsemen swooping after us.

"Uh, I hoped we wouldn't be missed," clicks Bucko, feedin' his hoss the leather and bendin' his long carcass away out ahead o' the flattened pony's ears. "Must be that Mason's got a one-track mind," he goes on. "I saved the day for him, yet the ol' fool's still blood-thirsty."

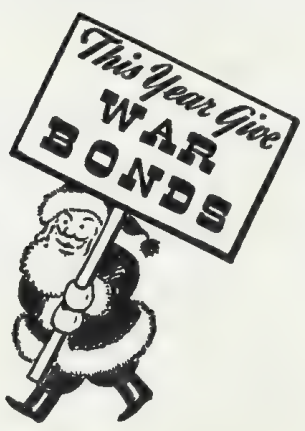
"You saved the day for him!" I yelp. "Oh, yeah?"

"Wal, I done so." As Bucko speaks, his hoss does a wildcat, end over end.

I never felt more like fannin' right along and leavin' a pard in trouble. But I can't bring myself to be that mean. So I wheel about, pick up Bucko's nag, and lead the critter back to where my pard's settin' in the sage.

The hombres who was chasin' us are pullin' their broncs up all 'round us afore pore ol' Bucko can get the use of his legs. That's that. I sigh deep and wonder how it'll feel to have my neck cracked with a rope.

Says Pete Winkler, who's the leader of this bunch, grinnin', "Why'd you lam out, boys? Old Tom Mason is so dag-goned tickled with you fellers that he sent us after you to hand you these. Them riders told me to slip you this too." He waves a couple of bills. Yel-



lowbacks! One-hundred-dollar bills! There was another Twenty for Bucko, which seemed like an added deal.

Bucko gets to his feet and reaches for all them bills. I'm flabbergasted plenty. Pete Winkler goes on, "Those two newcomers, Flash and Bill, won the bronc-ridin' hands down. They sure did. So the ol' man won his bet with Hardscrabble and you can imagine how Hardscrabble's frothin' at the mouth. He's so danged unreasonin' mad he let fall how him and his punchers borrowed the Tom Mason buckin' hosses for his men to practise on, too. That clears you two.

"Nor that ain't quite all," says Bucko, real calm-like as he pockets his century bill and hands me mine. He kept the extra Twenty himself. "Pete, tell my side pard how-come them professional riders showed up at the moment they was needed the worstest way."

"Oh, yes," says Pete, and chuckles. "That was good work, Bucko." Then to me, "You see, your brainy pardner sent a wire to Flash Karns and Bill O'Neil yesterday when he saw the announcement of the bronc-ridin' contest they bein' old pals of his. Told 'em they could pick up some jack if they could get to Pindell in time. Nacherly, them professionals might pay him for the tip,

[*Turn page*]

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if they won, which they did. Well, so long and good luck, S. A. dicks."

"Good luck," repeats Bucko several minutes later while we mosey along the road to places elsewhere. "I knowed that S. A. dick badge'd give us heaps of good luck. Yes, sir, Gumbo. I wish I hadn't lost it, so the next town we come to I could make use of it oncest again."

"Wal, you'll never find it and I ain't sorry, not none," says I. The fingers of my left hand shoved deep into my pocket, is feelin' the daggoned shiny trinket what so near cost us our lives, our necks and a lot more'n our sacred honor. Meantime my right hand's feelin' o' my old gullet to make sure there ain't a rope snug around it.

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 11)

He took part in the Sand Creek battle in which between five hundred and six hundred Indians were killed. He came through the actual battle unscathed, but came near losing his life while riding back over the battlefield as a messenger, when an Indian fired at him with a bow and arrow at close range. Once more the inaccuracy of Indian shooting spared his life, but his horse was wounded.

In time Billy Breakenridge drifted farther west to the country of the Apaches, that southeast corner of Arizona territory where Ed Schieffelin was soon to discover the mines that produced the roaring town of Tombstone.

This was a country of men. One might be good or he might be bad, or perhaps a blend of both, but if he counted at all he had to have one essential virtue—courage.

Gunmen Galore

For a period of about ten years, from about 1877 to 1887, there probably were more real gunmen in Cochise County, Arizona, and its adjoining counties, than were ever gathered together in any one locality or territory of that size in the United States, either before or since.

The bad men were a law unto themselves, and settled their mutual differences without recourse to the court of law. It was a case of the survival of the fittest. Coroner's juries often rendered a verdict of "Suicide" in favor of the party of the second part on the grounds that he should have known better than to have attempted to get the drop on a man whom he knew was faster than he.

To Tombstone came young Breakenridge, to the town known as the gunman's paradise, where it was said there could at times be counted no less than forty gunmen on the streets at one time.

A town that included in its citizenship and in its frequenters such men as Frank Leslie, Curley Bill, John Ringo, Dave Nagle, Billy Claybourn, Frank Stillwell, "Doc" Holliday, Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp and his brothers, Billy Grounds, Luke Short, Charlie Storms and many others whose guns had made them famous.

Such a town did not lack excitement.

Rival Candidates

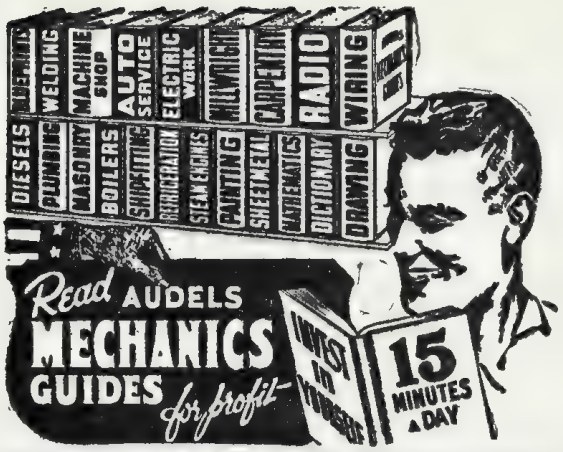
It so happened that soon after young Breakenridge came to Tombstone there were two aspirants for the office of sheriff. One was the noted gunman Wyatt Earp, known to be friendly with the cattle rustlers and lawless element, but a fast man with a gun and one who seemed to have plenty of courage.

The office of sheriff was worth forty thousand dollars per year, as the sheriff was also the tax assessor and collector and the board of supervisors allowed him ten per cent for collections.

The other and successful aspirant to the office was John H. Behan, and Breakenridge became a deputy under Behan, which of course was not to the liking of the defeated candidate and his more or less lawless friends, all handy with their sixguns.

Among these stalwart gunmen moved Billy Breakenridge, the new deputy sheriff. The

[*Turn page*]



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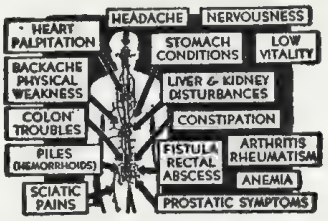

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young man was friendly, amiable, soft-spoken. The question was, in the telling word of the west, whether he had guts, but Breakenridge demonstrated not once, but many times, that he had the necessary iron in his blood.

Nerve and Diplomacy

He demonstrated not only his nerve, but diplomacy as well, when he went out into the wild country of the cattle rustlers' ranches to collect taxes, taking with him as a companion and bodyguard one of the most notorious outlaws of the time, "Curley" Bill. He demonstrated again that he had plenty of nerve when he went right into the stronghold of a gang of outlaws to recover a race horse that had been stolen, when he stayed all night in the outlaw camp and rode away next morning with the race horse amid a hail of bullets.

Brave men in those days were the kind that looked a man in the eye, studied his every move and planned to block that move if it was hostile. Those who became panic-stricken did not see the tell-tale signs that would be observed by a brave man, and would warn him that the other man was going into hostile action, and those who did not observe those warning signs usually died young.

A Daring Capture

He demonstrated that he had not only nerve, but could think fast and use strategy, when he walked calmly into a hotel dining room early one morning in quest of a bad man wanted for cattle rustling. The man was Milt Hicks. Breakenridge had seen his horse tied behind the hotel, and expected to walk into the hotel, confront the cattle rustler and let the situation develop after that, meeting any emergency that might arise as best he could.

Hicks knew that Breakenridge held a warrant for him, he had been hiding out and making himself more or less scarce in town, but had sneaked in to see his sweetheart who resided in the hotel. Breakenridge expected to find his quarry seated at the table having breakfast, but as he started to enter the dining room he ran right into Hicks coming out. With a casual good morning the deputy stuck out his right hand to shake hands with the cattle rustler. Hicks was so taken by surprise that he actually started to shake hands with the man who held a warrant for his arrest and whom he had said would never live to take him to jail.

With the proffered handshake Breakenridge grabbed Hicks right hand and held it while he deftly lifted Hicks' gun from his holster with his left, then with the cattle rustler's gun as well as his own in his possession, the formality of placing the bad man under arrest and taking him to jail was easy.

A Dangerous Trail

In the battle of the Chandler Ranch about nine miles from Tombstone, when Billy Breakenridge had trailed two murderers and their pal and had ascertained that they were holed up at the ranch, and while he knew that there might be three or four other outlaws in the party, he had been advised to organize a posse to go with him after the wanted men, but he refused.

He did not like to work with posses, he preferred his own quiet way of outwitting the men he sought, so he took only two men with him. The murderers he was after were Zwing Hunt and Billy Grounds, their pal Bull Lewis.

It was a foregone conclusion that the men, who were well known gunmen, could not be taken without a battle unless strategy was used and this was the plan of the deputy. He proposed to hide near where the men kept their horses and as they came out early in the morning to care for the stock, to get the drop on them and take them in alive. But the inexperience of one of the miners, deputized to go with Billy, in walking boldly up to the door of the ranch house he had been told to guard, and knocking and demanding that the men come out and surrender, cost the miner his life and precipitated a gun battle.

This battle lasted not more than two minutes, but when the smoke cleared away Billy Breakenridge was the only one of the six men involved in the gun battle that was not a casualty.

I hope we won't forget as we travel over smooth concrete highways on our western trips or gaze from the window of an air conditioned streamlined pullman car at the beauty of the west, its waving fields of grain, its wide expanse of grazing land and its great herds of cattle and its bustling towns and industries, that we owe these things in a great measure to those brave men and women who blazed the way over western trails.

They carried with them a sense of justice and fair play and had the courage, although they loved peace, to fight for the things they knew to be right. They were men who could shoot straight, and who could kill when it was necessary to take a life in the furthering of the cause of winning the west to civilization.

Billy Breakenridge was such a man!

Adios.

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

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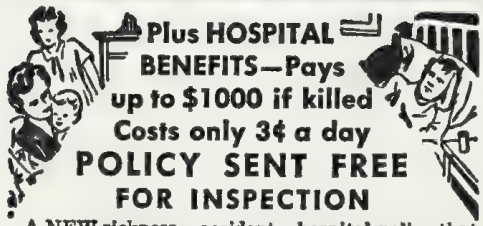

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Solo Canyon on gleaming, newly-bolted rails, a smother of black smoke belching from the locomotive stack. A crisp winter wind that had a raw, razor-sharp edge to it, whipped the smoke in a feathery trailing plume above the jolting line of gondolas and flats.

This was bleak, rugged country in northern Wyoming with a hint of wildness in the land and in the wind which scoured down through the deepening gorge.

Behind the snorting locomotive was a loaded material train. Flats and gondolas heaped with rails, spikes, ties, rough board lumber for construction shanties, hay and grain, and a wide assortment of tools. And on the last flat in front of the caboose were a score of rough and tough, slab-muscled railroad construction men, ready to join the thousands already laboring for Wyoming & Western, helping to hew an empire of steel out of the wilderness.

In the cab of the locomotive Tom Brady, the engineer, shouted a question to his fireman.

"Do yuh think we'll be makin' the run to the end of track safely this time, Mike?" Brady asked loudly.

O'Leary drew a grimy sleeve across his sweat-streaked face and grinned, but before he could answer a third man in the cab, Jack Bannion, Wyoming & Western's new trouble-shooter, broke into the conversation.

"Is there anything to cause yuh to think yuh won't reach the end of track without accident?" he inquired tensely.

"Plenty," replied Brady. "Are yuh forgettin' the three supply trains that were wrecked within the last five weeks?"

"Yuh mean yuh think somebody's been tamperin' with the rails?" asked Bannion.

"That's just what I mean," growled Brady. "And I'm sayin' it's that bunch of Colorado Central scalawags who are tryin' to keep us from beatin' them to Salt Lake. If I know Bill Tracy he'll stop at nothin'. He's Central's trouble-shooter but he hangs around Wyoming and Western more than anythin' else and there's always a bunch of hardcases taggin' along at his heels."

"Yuh're wrong, Tom," insisted Mike O'Leary, leaning on his shovel. "It's Big Ed Graham that the railroad's got to watch. The Government took away a lot of his free graze and handed it to Wyoming and Western. Graham ain't the man to forget that. I'll give yuh three to one odds it's him that got those tie-cutters to start trouble."

Brady shrugged, his manner showing his disbelief. He turned to the cab window to slant a keen glance out along the rails that stretched steadily away in the distance up the slope.

O'Leary ducked back to work with his scoop, firing up the boiler to maintain a full head of steam.

They were nearing the summit of the long grade now and Solo Canyon had widened considerably. On either side of the right of way stretched towering walls of shale. But on the right side the wall was close-throwing a distinct shadow across the rails. To the left of the train there was a level stretch broken by an occasional gully or culvert and rimmed by broken rocks and thorny brush.

Brady tugged at the whistle cord. The thin, eerie wail sped through the canyon, bouncing back and forth from rock to rock. Into the tail end of the sound came a rumbling roar.

It grew in volume, became a thunderous din, was multiplied by other booming concussions. A gray tinge of dread washed over Tom Brady's face. He lunged to the cab window and looked out. His narrowed eyes were greeted by the horrible picture of tons and tons of rocks cascading into the defile.

A gray smother of dust rose up to dim the sky's brightness. The landslide tumbled thousands of rocks down the shaly slopes. They swept over the tracks, buried them in hills of debris and rubble.

Brady swung back, shut off the throttle and threw on the brakes. Sparks flew from the pounding drivers. Brake blocks squealed against protesting wheel flanges and the desperate engineer shoved open the petcock, shooting sand from the boiler down to the rails, fighting the forward momentum of the train with air and sand.

But it was no use. The huge locomotive rolled on into the landslide. Hurtling boulders bounded down the mountainside, swept the steel sides of the high-wheeler. Up that crushing, onspeeding weight the locomotive left the rails. The cow-catcher and whirling drive wheels plowed into the other section of track, digging up the newly set ties, gouging a deep furrow into the roadbed.

"Jump!" yelled Brady, and made for the open area between the engine and the tender.

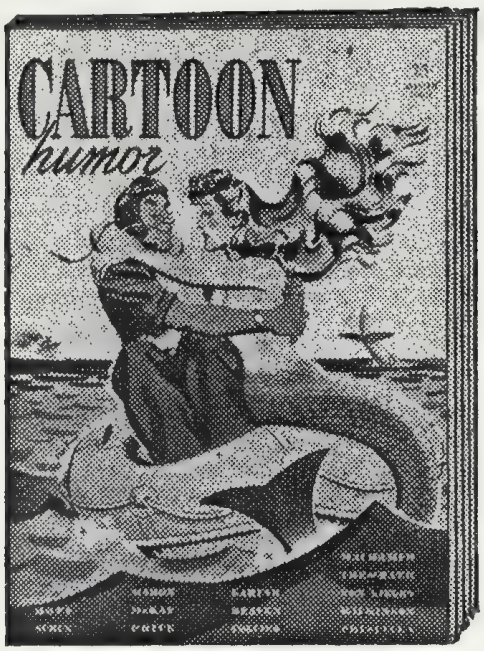
Bannion raced that way with Brady and O'Leary behind him. But the engineer never knew whether the other two men made the jump in time.

Suddenly the locomotive plunged over on its side. It careened down a shaly slope into an embankment. There was a deafening explosion as the boiler burst and a thick geyser of steam billowed into the sky.

Metal crashed and splintered and the loaded supply cars, coupling and drawbars solidly

[*Turn page*]

A LAUGH ON EVERY PAGE



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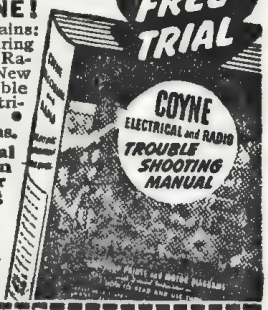

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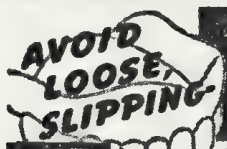

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smashing, spilled sidewise off the rails. Dust and smoke made a horrible gray-black pall and through the mounting racket came the terrible cries of smothered men as all the way down the line the lurching string of flats and gondolas were trapped in a gushing stream of rocks.

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STEEL RAILS TO PERIL is paced with action from the first page to the last. Tense drama and suspense run all the way through this novel of the Masked Rider at his dauntless best. You'll enjoy every bit of it—and remember it for a long time to come!

There will also be a strong novelet and a number of swiftly paced and colorful shorter Western yarns in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Foghorn Clancy will give you another interesting TRAIL TALK department—and all in all it will be a gala issue!

OUR LETTER BOX

WE ALWAYS enjoy hearing from our readers—and that means all of you, so write us regularly! We want to know what stories you have liked best in the magazine, and about those yarns that just didn't suit you. Write and tell us just what you think. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y.

Here's a letter from a reader who seems to like the magazine right well:

I've been reading the stories in MASKED RIDER WESTERN for some time and I like them just fine.

I noticed in your letter box where some hombre from Illinois doesn't like your packed action stories. Maybe this gent can't realize how exciting the West really was in the old days.

Well, I like the yarns—just keep a-proddin'. I'm really from down in Texas. Only been here a little while and I can't wait hardly for your next issue. Your stories keep a fella from getting all lonesome and jittery. I think they really are interesting, including the TRAIL TALK department.—*Clinton L. Sears, Portland, Oregon.*

Thanks for your letter, Clint. We appreciate what you've had to say—and we'll keep right on trying to please you and all the rest of our readers.

You asked for my opinion—and you are going to get it. Of the MASKED RIDER WESTERN novels I have read there were six that I liked and three that I didn't care for very much. I could list all of them by titles and authors but I'm not going to do it. Maybe this will keep you guessing!—*John Marshall, Philadelphia, Pa.*

All right, John. You've got us guessing—but since you liked six novels out of nine it looks like the odds are still on in our favor. Thanks for writing. That's all for now. So thanks to all of you—and so long!

—THE EDITOR.

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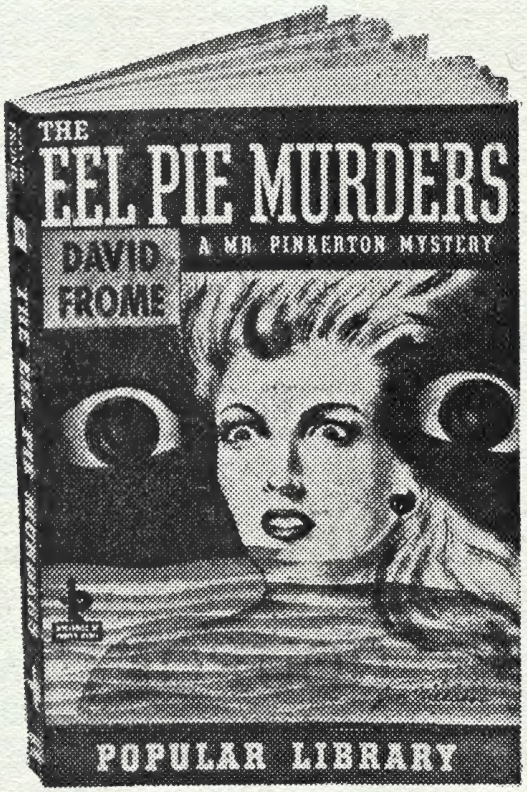

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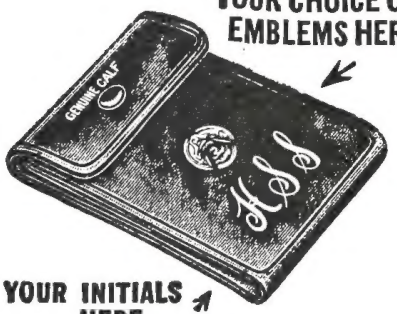

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When closed, this handsome Billfold has the soft velvety feel you find only in select quality Leather. Your choice of Emblems and Initials are beautifully embossed in 23 karat gold on the face of the Billfol . Due to difficulty in obtaining choice leather because of war conditions, the supply of these Billfolds is limited. Remember if you send your order promptly, we will include absolutely FREE, a beautiful Identification Key Tag and Gilt Chain to match, all hand engraved with your Name, Address, City and State. If after receiving your Billfold and Free Gift, you don't positively agree that this is the most outstanding bargain you have ever come across, return them to us and your money will be cheerfully refunded in full. Send your order today, without fail, so you won't be disappointed.

Rush This Coupon For This Once-In-A-Lifetime Bargain!

ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART,
Dept. 266-H, 54 W. Illinois St., Chicago.

If you want a LODGE, ARMY, NAVY, MARINE or AIR CORPS INSIGNIA, state name here.

Gentlemen: I enclose $1.98. Please send me a Genuine Leather Billfold with my name and choice of Emblems engraved in 23k gold. Include, absolutely free, a lifetime Identification Plate carrying my full Name and Social Security Number, or Draft Number. Also include FREE an Identification Key Tag and Gilt Chain to match, all hand-engraved with my Name, Address, City and State.

My Full Name .....
(Please print clearly)

Address .....

City ..... State.....

Social Security Number ..... Army Draft Number .....

☐ Please ship C.O.D. for $1.98 plus a few pennies postage charges.

YOUR *Handwriting* PUTS THE "VITAMINS"

Y, O, U,

INTO LETTERS !

When he gets those letters, let him find you in each one. Just talk to him the way you'd do if you were together. Tell him what goes on at home—all the familiar things he will recognize. And he will see you as you talk. Tell him how proud you are of him—and well, you know—tell him how deeply you love him. It's *Oh!* so important that you tell him *often!*

SHEAFFER'S peacetime products, along with all others of similar nature built by other companies, are now curtailed by WPB order. They are rationed to dealers—through them to the public. The men and women of SHEAFFER, who are released from pen and pencil craftsmanship, are hard at work in the manufacture of SHEAFFER wartime devices. W. A. Sheaffer Pen Co., Fort Madison, Iowa; Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

At left: "TRIUMPH" *Lifetime** pen, with clip, $12.50; pencil, $5—"TRIUMPH" TUCKAWAY model, without clip, for men or women, carries safely *in all positions* in purse or pocket—pen, $12.50; pencil, $4.

*All *Lifetime* pens, identified by the White Dot, are unconditionally guaranteed for the life of the first user except against loss and willful damage—when serviced, if complete pen is returned, subject only to insurance, postage, handling charge—35c.

FINELINE LEADS

For your pencil—the original, strong, smooth-writing Fineline leads. Developed for Sheaffer by the Jos. Dixon Crucible Co. Economy package, 25c; regular package, 15c.

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SHEAFFER'S

IF YOU OWN A SHEAFFER PEN . . .

Sheaffer or authorized service stations have parts to repair it, and will do the work promptly and well. Sheaffer recommends the exclusive use of SKRIP for all pens because it is easier on critical metal and rubber parts. It will make your pen write better, last longer, require less servicing.

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